



This website is no longer maintained.

For updated information regarding human protections, notably the revisions to the Common Rule for the protection of human research participants go into effect on January 21, 2019, please see the Human Research Protection Program website or send an e-mail to irb@vt.edu. This website will be retired later in 2019.

Paying / Compensating Subjects

Policy No. 3.09

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Introduction

Paying individuals to participate in research has been a controversial issue within the IRB community for many years; however, there are few regulatory guidelines to address this issue.

The Virginia Tech IRB's position is that compensation **may be provided to appropriately compensate subjects for their time, travel, and/or efforts, and may not be used to unduly influence potential human subjects to participate in research activities.**

General Items to Note:

- ▶ Compensation **must not be** large enough to be construed as **undue influence**. See below "Compensation Amounts" section for further information.
- ▶ Researchers and the IRB must consider the subject pool's **socioeconomics** while reviewing protocols involving payment for research participation.
- ▶ If possible, **prorate** compensation based on participation. See below "Prorating Compensation" section for further information.
- ▶ Compensation **must not be contingent upon completion of study procedures**. Even if the subject decides to withdraw from the study, he/she must be compensated, at least partially, based on the study procedures he/she has completed.

Informing Subjects of Compensation

In almost all cases, subjects must be fully informed of the amounts, methods, and timing of compensation, including details regarding prorated amounts and the maximum amount that may be received. Such information should be included within any relevant consent forms provided to subjects so they may consider the information before agreeing to participate.

Researchers may also elect to mention compensation within recruitment materials (e.g., flyers, ads). When doing so, refer to [acceptable and unacceptable ways to describe compensation within recruitment materials](#) (PDF).

☐ [Compensation Amounts](#)

As noted above, compensation **must not be** large enough to be construed as **undue influence**. Unfortunately, there are no set standards for what amount is considered "undue influence."

The IRB often determines* whether a proposed payment amount is reasonable by thinking of the value in terms of an hourly payment. For example, \$10 - \$20 per hour is typically considered reasonable. Considerations are also made for the extent of participation. For example, subjects may be paid a greater amount for providing a muscle biopsy than for participation in a low-risk interview.

**Decisions regarding payment amounts are made on a case-by-case basis.*

☐ [Prorating Compensation](#)

The VT IRB typically requires that compensation provided to human subjects be prorated based on the extent of participation. For example, subjects may receive a pre-determined dollar amount for each study session s/he attends. Another example is providing subjects a pre-determined dollar amount per hour of involvement.

However, at times, prorating compensation is unreasonable. For example, imagine the scenario of paying subjects \$5 for the completion of a 20-minute online survey. In this given scenario, it is not reasonable to prorate a \$5 amount. In contrast, conducting a three-hour interview session with subjects for a total payment of \$30 should be prorated, perhaps at an hourly rate (i.e., \$10/hour).

When prorating compensation, if the recruitment materials provided to or viewed/heard by subjects will mention compensation, the range of compensation or "amount per session" must be provided instead of simply listing the maximum amount that could be earned (i.e., if a subject were to complete all of the study activities). For example, if a research project involves three sessions and subjects are paid \$50 per session, the recruitment materials should state: "Compensation ranges from \$50 to \$150" or "You will be compensated \$50 per session for a total of \$150 possible."

If providing subjects an hourly rate for participation, it is recommended that a cap or upper-limit be applied and that subjects be informed in advance (e.g., within the consent form) of the hourly rate and cap. Use of an upper-limit protects both subjects and researchers as it ensures the compensation amounts are agreed upon by all in advance and it is understood that only a certain amount may be received.

Finally, as noted above, compensation must not be contingent upon completion of study procedures. Even if the subject decides to withdraw from the study, he/she must be compensated, at least partially, based on the study procedures he/she has completed.

☐ [Performance-Based Compensation](#)

The IRB carefully considers the ethical implications of research that proposes to provide a subject payment (monetary or other) based on the subject's performance on research tasks (in other words, subjects receive more money if they perform better than other subjects or to a given standard). When sufficient justification is provided for such a payment technique and the IRB approves the process, the IRB recommends and may require that the recruitment and consent materials clearly note that some or all of the payment is performance based.

The following are acceptable and unacceptable methods to describe performance-based compensation within **recruitment materials**:

- ▶ **Acceptable:** Include the performance-based dollar amount within the advertisement; however, list it separately from time-based compensation. For example, "You will be compensated \$50 for your time and travel, and will have the opportunity to receive up to an additional \$20 based on your performance on the research tasks."
- ▶ **Acceptable:** Include only the time-based compensation within the advertisement. For example, "You will be compensated \$50 for your time and travel." (Note: subjects would be provided details of compensation, including performance-based compensation details, within the consent form.)
- ▶ **Unacceptable:** Include the performance-based dollar amount within the total compensation advertised. For example, "Earn up to \$120."

Study Completion Bonuses

"Study completion bonuses" are payments assured to subjects should they complete all of the study activities. For example, a study asking subjects to participate in ten in-lab sessions may want to reward subjects a bonus payment if and when the subject completes all ten sessions. This technique is popular for longitudinal studies and, if properly justified and done correctly, may be acceptable to the IRB.

The IRB makes decisions regarding study completion bonuses on a case-by-case basis and is generally accepting of the practice as long as the bonus amount is reasonable and, in most cases, is a small proportion of the study's total payment. See the above "Prorating Compensation" section for more information.

Lotteries

If using a lottery method, the following information should be distributed to research participants (i.e., within consent document, invitation letter or script):

- ▶ The potential odds and amount for winning;
- ▶ Individual responsible for drawing the winner; and
- ▶ Individual responsible for observing the drawing, to ensure that the results are not biased.

Payment for Referrals

As of February 2014, the IRB decided to generally disallow the practice of paying subjects for referring others to the research program. In other words, the practice of paying a subject should they refer a friend, family member, colleague, etc. for participation in a research study is generally not permissible. Note: the IRB's decision does not disallow the practice of referrals altogether, it instead focuses on the ethical concerns of paying subjects for the referrals.

Virginia Tech Policies & Procedures

VT has specific policies and procedures for selecting and paying human subjects participants. Visit the following websites for a description of these policies and procedures:

- ▶ [Controller's Office: Policy #23715c, Human Subject Selection & Payment](#)
- ▶ [Bursar's Office: Petty Cash Fund and Disbursement Fund Procedures](#)

- ▶ [Contact the IRB Office](#)
- ▶ [About the IRB](#)
- ▶ [Related Compliance Links](#)