I denotes inflammation, CRP denotes plasma C-reactive protein, Ca denotes cancer, and X denotes some unknown factor(s) that can influence CRP, including genetic causes.

In diagram (a), CRP is epiphenomenal, in that it is not on the causal pathway from I to Ca: in statistical analysis CRP is associated with Ca, but not if I is adjusted for. CRP could still be an indicator of Ca risk, but intervening on CRP would have no impact on Ca risk; the only variable in the diagram that would be a target for intervention to alter Ca risk would be I.

In diagram (b) CRP is on the causal pathway: adjustment for I would have no impact on the association between CRP and Ca risk, but the association between I and Ca risk would disappear with adjustment for CRP. CRP is now a target for intervention along with its causal factor(s) X.