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# Women's Health

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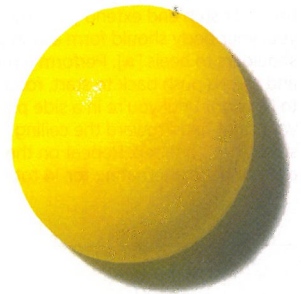
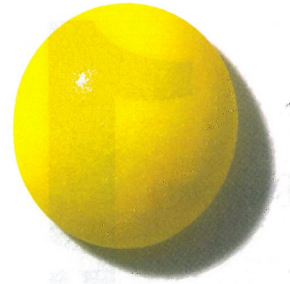
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# fake pill, r



Your brain has a built-in pharmacy that can be tapped to heal a host of medical problems. *WH* unlocks



# Real power



the mystery of the placebo effect—and reveals how to use your mind to conquer aches and pains.



Understand how a person can be so desperate for pain relief that they can trick themselves into thinking they've been given an agony-abating medication, it helps to step back in history: In 1772, when smallpox and typhoid fever left thousands of patients in misery (and today's narcotics were a mere fantasy), Scottish physician William Cullen had two seemingly bizarre ideas. The first was that sympathy could cure disease. The second was that an inert substance, like mint water, could relieve pain. Turns out, he was onto something, and his notes mark the birth of the placebo effect, or what happens when an inactive treatment convinces your brain that it's a powerful cure.

Centuries later, the phenomenon was hinted at in pop culture in the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz* (although the guy was a faker, his mind tricks still helped the movie's characters feel better), but it really hit the big time in 1955, when war surgeon Henry Beecher published an article that claimed more than one-third of all patients could be cured by placebos alone. His paper caused a bigger stir than a Kardashian wedding does today and solidified the placebo effect as scientific fact.

Yet *placebo* is still sometimes considered a dirty word. Pharma companies go to expensive lengths to show that their meds outperform inert pills, and drug trials are often dismissed for having "just a placebo effect." For a consumer, though, the most fascinating thing about faux treatments (yes, including stuff like Cullen's mint water) is what they reveal about the healing power of the mind.

## Head Games

Placebos are often called sugar pills, but they're not always pills, and they don't only show up in drug trials. Just about any medical treatment—topical creams, inhalants, injections—can produce a placebo effect. Even fake acupuncture and sham surgery can act as placebos, says psychologist Cynthia McRae, Ph.D., of the University of Denver.

In fact, the more invasive the treatment, the stronger the effect: In a recent study on Parkinson's treatments, dopamine neurons were transplanted (via—*gulp*—a skull drill) into the brains of patients with the disease. But only half of the patients actually got the full procedure. The other half were in a control group that just

got tiny holes drilled into their heads—yet because they thought they'd received the real thing, they still felt better a year later, even without new neurons.

Indeed, scientists know there's one key ingredient to a successful placebo effect: belief. If you truly think a treatment will work, well, for some conditions, it just might. Nowhere has this been more evident than in antidepressant research. In his book *The Emperor's New Drugs: Exploding the Antidepressant Myth*, Irving Kirsch, Ph.D., examined a host of studies and found that 80 percent (80 percent!) of the effectiveness of such drugs is due to the placebo effect alone.

Another famous study compared the herbal treatment Saint-John's-wort to the antidepressant Zoloft. Over time, the Saint-John's-wort eased symptoms in 24 percent of participants; Zoloft, in 25 percent. But a placebo beat both, nixing depression in 32 percent of patients—sans any side effects.

"Expectancy can be a powerful determinant," explains placebo researcher Ben Colagiuri, Ph.D., of the University of New South Wales. "The more effective patients perceive [a drug] to be, the more effective it can actually be." Sometimes, he notes, the belief in a treatment is more effective than the ingredients in the treatment itself.

## Special Effects

Of course, some health quandaries (a broken leg, a breast tumor) can't be cured by placebos. But that's not to say sugar pills won't help physical ailments. Faux treatments are dramatically effective against pain, says Ted Kaptchuk, the director of placebo studies at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. "Your body has its own medicine that works similarly to the drugs you'd find at the drugstore," he says.

Take a case of killer cramps: When your period hits, your uterus alerts your nervous system, which sends a pain signal to the brain (you know the rest—ouch!). Medications such as aspirin work by reducing inflammation, but the very act of taking a pill activates your neurotransmitters to help further relieve pain. The effect is so intense that just swallowing a pill when your period hits can prompt your brain to release its own natural painkillers, says Kaptchuk. Yup, taking a sugar pill—maybe even if you know it's a sugar pill—might send your pelvic aches packing.

Another potential mending aid: your doctor. When sick, the average Jane visits her general practitioner—or even her gyno—for treatment; some appointments can last around 10 minutes and, for many women, that's the only 10 minutes they'll get with their physician all year, says Andrew Leuchter, M.D., a professor of psychiatry and director of the Laboratory of Brain, Behavior, and Pharmacology at UCLA. That's a big loss, considering just how far a prolonged, gentle bedside manner

### When the Trick Works

Here's how well placebos performed for patients in trials and studies:

#### Irritable Bowel Syndrome

**60%** experienced a decline of symptoms

#### Depression

**32%** responded to a placebo

#### Migraine

**41%** felt better after a placebo

#### Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

**20%** had more energy after a placebo treatment

Percentage of American doctors who prescribed a placebo treatment in the past year

Source: *British Medical Journal*

Percentage of  
American doctors who  
believe placebos are  
ethically permissible  
Source: *British Medical Journal*

62

can go. A Harvard University study found that the effectiveness of a placebo treatment rose from 44 percent to 62 percent when the doctor treated patients with warmth, attention, and confidence. Other research shows that even a nicer-looking office gives patients higher treatment expectations. "Just think back on the times your mother kissed a scratch to make you feel better," explains *Women's Health* advisor Frank Lipman, M.D. "That simple act of nurturing alone is enough to stimulate the body's powerful self-healing capacity."

## No Pills, No Problem?

So powerful is the placebo effect that some doctors dish out unnecessary prescriptions just to satisfy needy patients, according to a survey published in the *British Medical Journal*. It's hard to picture an M.D. writing a sham prescription, but consider this, says Leuchter: "If a patient comes to a doctor with a miserable cold and is desperate for medicine, the doctor might prescribe an antibiotic, even though he knows full well that cold viruses can't be cured with such drugs."

But because the patient *believes* she's being treated, her immune system may be more activated and heal her faster, says Leuchter. (That's not always without risk. In this case, the placebo is an actual drug meant to treat something else, and it may have very real side effects, including creating antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Safer cold-busting placebos are vitamins or OTC meds, both of which can stimulate the placebo response.) While the ethics of prescribing a placebo are hotly debated, one thing is clear: If everyone could harness the power of placebos, many patients would feel a lot better.

It starts with a positive attitude. "An open mind toward the possibility of improvement and wellness is a crucial ingredient in feeling better," says Leuchter. Getting on board (or in bed) with positive thinking can even enhance your sex life. A recent study found that one-third of

women who took a placebo in a drug trial for sexual dysfunction meds showed a significant increase in arousal and desire.

Not an eternal optimist? There are still practical ways to exploit the power of placebos, says Lipman. "First, find a physician you trust and respect," he advises. "A doctor's knowledge is important, but so is his character and your relationship with him." Finding your medical match means you might believe in your doctor and his treatment enough to trigger the placebo effect.

Lipman also tells his patients to start practicing self-healing rituals like yoga, meditation, or deep breathing. If you tell yourself over and over that, say, 10 minutes of deep breathing is a prescription for a tension headache—or that a glass of ice-cold water can wash away fatigue—the belief in the

treatment alone might eventually condition your body into fixing the problem sans drugs.

If you do need real meds, turn that quick pop-and-swallow into a more conscious process, says Dan Moerman, Ph.D., a medical anthropologist at the University of Michigan at Dearborn. "Study a pill's shape and size, and tell yourself—out loud—that it's going to work," he says. It sounds goofy, but bulking up the importance of your pill ritual may make your medicine more effective or help kick-start your own self-healing.

Says Leuchter: "If you have a glass of green tea every time you take an aspirin, it's possible that eventually just the green tea could prompt your brain to relieve pain on its own." That realization is sweeter than any sugar pill ever could be. ■

**If Looks Could Cure**  
Savvy drug-makers know the appearance of meds can stimulate the placebo effect.

### Colors

>Red, yellow, or orange pills are usually associated with stimulants that may improve mental or physical function, says Arif Khan, M.D., medical director of the Northwest Clinical Research Center in Bellevue, Washington.

>Blue or green pills are thought to quell anxiety and are often the hue of choice for sleeping pills.

>Heart medications are often pink or peach. "For a serious health problem, people prefer a mild color—something bold like blood red doesn't really appeal," says Khan.

### Form

People consider injections to be the most effective form of medicine, followed by capsules, solid pills, and then liquids, notes Khan.

### Dosage

"Four pills are more effective [as a placebo] than two," says Dan Moerman, Ph.D. "It could be that you think you're getting a larger, more effective dose, which enhances the effect."

### Branding and Price

Just like with wine or chocolate, higher priced, well-known drugs are viewed as better quality than generics, says Andrew Leuchter, M.D. Researchers found that a \$2.50 placebo brings more relief than a 10-cent one does.

