

The Placebo Effect



The placebo effect is a term used to describe when a person's physical or mental health improves after taking a medicine which appears to be real but which has no actual therapeutic benefit. In Latin, the word placebo means 'I will please.' Essentially, what happens is that because the patient doesn't know that the medicine is fake, their body responds to the treatment as if it was real.

The placebo effect has been well known for thousands of years. Scientists used to use the placebo effect as a way to prove that a new medicine didn't work. During clinical trials, one group would receive the drug being studied and the other group would receive the placebo. If the placebo worked as well as the actual drug, the drug was believed not to have worked.

In more recent studies, though, scientists are concluding that a successful placebo trial doesn't prove that a particular drug doesn't work, it indicates that there may be some other, non-pharmacological mechanism involved in healing. We know that the placebo effect involves some complex neurobiological reactions including releasing endorphins and dopamine, which are related to positive emotions. However, it is believed that one of the reasons that placebos are successful has to do with the ritual of treatment – visiting the doctor, undergoing therapy, and receiving the doctors' attention and care. Today, science is finding that treating patients with placebos can be as effective as treating them with actual medicines.

1. What is the placebo effect?

2. How did scientists use to use the placebo effect?

3. What does science think about the placebo effect today?
