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What Is the Placebo Effect?



IN THIS ARTICLE

[How Are Placebos Used?](#)

[What Is the Placebo Effect?](#)

[How Does the Placebo Effect Work?](#)

A [placebo](#) is anything that seems to be a "real" medical treatment -- but isn't. It could be a pill, a shot, or some other type of "fake" treatment. What all placebos have in common is that they do not contain an active substance meant to affect health.

How Are Placebos Used?

Researchers use placebos during studies to help them understand what effect a new drug or some other treatment might have on a particular condition.

For instance, some people in a study might be given a new drug to [lower cholesterol](#). Others would get a placebo. None of the people in the study will know

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Researchers then compare the effects of the drug and the placebo on the people in the study. That way, they can determine the effectiveness of the new drug and check for side effects.

What Is the Placebo Effect?

Sometimes a person can have a response to a placebo. The response can be positive or negative. For instance, the person's symptoms may improve. Or the person may have what appears to be side effects from the treatment. These responses are known as the "placebo effect."

There are some conditions in which a placebo can produce results even when people know they are taking a placebo. Studies show that placebos can have an effect on conditions such as:

- [Depression](#)
- Pain
- [Sleep disorders](#)
- [Irritable bowel syndrome](#)
- [Menopause](#)

In one study involving [asthma](#), people using a placebo inhaler did no better on breathing tests than sitting and doing nothing. But when researchers asked for people's perception of how they felt, the placebo inhaler was reported as being as effective as medicine in providing relief.



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Research on the placebo effect has focused on the relationship of mind and body. One of the most common theories is that the placebo effect is due to a person's expectations. If a person expects a pill to do something, then it's possible that the body's own chemistry can cause effects similar to what a [medication](#) might have caused.

1 2

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