

Study evaluates placebo effectiveness

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Harvard Medical School scientists who usually use placebos to test a new treatment's effectiveness have conducted a trial testing placebos.

The study focused on the effectiveness of placebos -- defined as an innocuous or inert medication given to a control group in experiments on drug efficacy.

The Harvard researchers were exploring the existence of a so-called placebo effect -- an immediate physiological response to placebos that's being reported in an increasing number of lab experiments.

The results of the study, said Ted Kaptchuk, an assistant professor of medicine, showed the placebo effect varies by type of placebo used.

"These findings suggest the medical ritual of a device can deliver an enhanced placebo effect beyond that of a placebo pill," said Kaptchuk. "There are many conditions in which ritual is irrelevant when compared with drugs, such as in treatment of a bacterial infection, but the other extreme may also be true: In some cases, the ritual may be the critical component."

The experiment is detailed in the current issue of the British Medical Journal.

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