



## Upper Arlington Preventative Primary Care

### The Placebo Effect – Influence on Health and Wellness

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The placebo effect in healthcare, briefly defined, is the belief that a medical procedure, nutritional agent, or medicine is having a healing influence even if it may not actually be contributing to improved health. Although not a new phenomenon in the medical world, it is increasingly a significant area of interest in both health and wellness practice and research.

As but one example, we do not fully understand how significantly an alternative medical treatment like acupuncture truly benefits healing on its own, versus how much of the medical benefit is from the placebo effect. However, the often powerful belief that acupuncture is facilitating the healing process is an incentive for those that receive the treatments.

We also know the placebo effect plays a role in more traditional and mainstream medical treatments. Accordingly, understanding the true influence of the placebo effect is important for both medical professionals and patients - and not only when examining alternative and complementary medical and wellness treatments, but also for commonly prescribed treatments and medicines.

Historically, scientific researchers and physicians have had a sort of a mixed “relationship”, if you will, with the placebo effect when it comes to both controlled research studies and their patients in clinics. Certainly, if the results are positive, most physicians will encourage a belief that a treatment will work. But no healthcare provider wants to have the full benefits of medicines or medical procedures to come exclusively from a placebo influence. Many researchers have investigated if the placebo influence is truly making a difference as they try to more fully understand exactly what this potential healing influence actually is.

The word “placebo” comes from the Latin for “I will please”. It is most often is a “false” or simulated treatment - like a sugar pill or faked procedure - given to an unaware patient. And when someone fully believes in a pill, procedure - or in the positive influence of a skilled provider - and an improvement in their symptoms and/or overall health occurs that is when the placebo effect has the most positive benefit. The fundamental key for a placebo effect to occur is that the patient must believe they were given real medicine or an actual procedure.

It is well documented that with regard to physical pain the mind and body are an interconnected unit that functions as one synchronized whole. Interestingly, even when a known proven

medicine or medical procedure is more effective than a placebo, the belief of a patient will help to actually increase or heighten the medical effectiveness. This is further indication of the connectedness of the mind and body.

The interconnectedness of the mind and body, however, creates difficulty as we try to tease out the degree that positive health benefits are derived from an actual treatment or from a strongly held belief that something good will result. From a research perspective, the only valid means to rigorously test procedures and medicines against a potential placebo effect is with carefully controlled medical-clinical trials. In such a trial neither the scientists nor the patients know who is receiving the real medical treatment and who will be receiving the placebo.

Based upon a large number of published scientific studies examining the placebo effect, it has been estimated that approximately 25% of individuals provided with a placebo demonstrated signs of improvement in either their specific physical symptoms or overall health. This estimate jumps to nearly 40% when the individuals received their treatments from a known and trusted provider in a medical office or therapy environment. Again, this research indicates that the belief that a known medical professional is trying to aid in your pain relief is a powerful tool for effective treatment.

Often times amongst medical professionals the influence of a placebo has a reputation of deception. For example if a simple sugar tablet is given to a patient with a terrible migraine like headache they may indeed enjoy decreased symptoms for a time, but they have been in some ways deceived by their physician. The Hippocratic Oath implores physicians to try and cure the sickness or health problem an individual suffers from, not merely make them feel better for a short period of time.

On balance, when the research is considered in aggregate it appears that physicians and other healthcare providers should attempt to harness the placebo influence – not in a deceitful way - but rather as an accompaniment for both treatments that have a known positive influence, and for those treatments or procedures that have a less certain effectiveness. Increasing the effectiveness of any medical treatment will result in a positive benefit for the patient.

Bottom line: a positive outlook on your healthcare and a certain level of trust in your healthcare providers (especially with your primary care physician) can have a positive influence on your feelings of health and overall well-being.