

Placebos ease pain even when patients know they are fake

Oliver Moody Science Correspondent

It is hard to think of a medical prop that could be more cheerfully blatant than a bottle of bright orange cellulose capsules clearly marked “placebo pills”.

Yet these obviously fake painkillers have been found to significantly ease chronic back pain.

Patients who were repeatedly told that they were being given sham medication for their backs nevertheless felt a third less pain and disability, in one of the strongest indications yet that the placebo effect may be more complex and useful than previously thought.

Chronic pain is by far the leading cause of disability in the western world, affecting ten million people in Britain alone. About 2.5 million Britons have severe pain in their backs on a daily basis and the condition is estimated to



cost the NHS £12.3 billion and more than a million hours of GP appointments — equivalent to 800 senior doctors — every year.

A clinical trial carried out at a hospital in Lisbon suggests that the so-called honest placebo effect could be one of the answers to this epidemic thanks to the powers of suggestion and the unconscious mind.

Almost 100 people signed up for what they were told was going to be a “novel mind-body clinical study of chronic lower back pain”. When they arrived to meet the lead researcher half of the patients were carefully informed that they were being given capsules containing the main chemical component

of wood pulp, to be taken twice a day. The doctor explained that the body could respond to placebo pills much like Pavlov’s dogs, which were trained to salivate at the sound of a bell that they associated with feeding time. The other half of the patients were given no new medication and told to carry on as usual. After three weeks the first group reported about 28 per cent less pain and 29 per cent less disability linked to their condition. The second group felt no change.

In most drug trials a group of patients are given a placebo but told that it is the real thing. The Portuguese study, which is published in the journal *Pain*, is one of a small number of experiments that have turned that logic upside down.

Other researchers have found that telling patients that the acupuncture they are about to be given is a sham does not make the procedure any less useful for pain relief. Another paper in 2010 found that giving people with irritable bowel syndrome an honest placebo offered mild help with their symptoms.

As interest in the effect grows, several websites have sprung up to sell placebo pills. It is still not clear how they work, though, or whether they are better for some patients than others.

The authors of the latest study, which was led by Claudia Carvalho of the University Institute for Psychological Sciences in Lisbon, argue that it could be down to the comforting charade of taking a pill even when you know that it is fake.

“How is it that a placebo treatment is able to produce effects even when the participants know that the pill is inert?” they wrote. “One possibility is that the positive rationale with which the placebo was presented was convincing enough to allow participants to suspend their disbelief.”



Melting pot Britten Weekend, in Aldeburgh, Suffolk, features choreography by Richard Alston set to the music of Benjamin Britten

Best of both? M&S creates the croissant loaf

Andrew Ellison
Consumer Affairs Correspondent

Francophiles look away now. Marks & Spencer has decided to anglicise the croissant by turning it into a loaf.

M&S has created a sliceable version of the traditional French pastry for Britons who “love the delicious buttery taste of croissants” but prefer “the convenience of grabbing a slice of toast for breakfast”.

It is not the first assault on the croissant in Britain this year. Tesco announced in February that it would only sell straight-edged versions of the pastry. British shoppers, the supermarket said, were simply fed up with the



The bakery hybrid is a cross between a croissant and a loaf — or a “croloaf”

logistical challenge of spreading their jam on croissants with curved edges.

Marks & Spencer was more diplomatic, describing its new bakery hybrid — dubbed the “croloaf” — as the

“perfect fusion of the French and British breakfast”.

The croissant loaf does not have to be eaten on the day it is baked, M&S said, despite being made with French butter and an all-butter egg pastry. It “tastes just as good a few days after” — as long as it is toasted.

A slice contains only 114 calories, compared with 340 in the average croissant, M&S added, although that is still almost double that of a slice of ordinary white bread.

At £2.40 the croissant loaf is also more expensive than either a single croissant or normal sliced loaf of bread, both of which can be bought for less than £1.

£5

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