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# Health BEAT

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## AUSTIN WEATHER

<b>EVENING</b>  Upper 30s	<b>OVERNIGHT</b>  Near 30	<b>MORNING</b>  Mid 20s
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**Health BEAT**

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### Power of placebos

1/15/2003 5:00 AM  
By: Ivanhoe Broadcast News

▼ The reality of the placebo effect is nothing new to doctors, who have long noticed that the very act of taking a pill seems to have a positive effect on some patients.

□ Pain, illness, and other problems seem to improve in the absence of real medication. Doctors are unsure what's behind this placebo effect, but new research on the subject is shedding some light on it.



Janis Schonfeld suffered from depression before taking placebos.

[University of California at Los Angeles](#) researchers, led by Andrew Leuchter, M.D., set out to study the brain patterns of depressed patients who respond to placebos.

They admitted 51 patients, warning them that some would receive anti-depressants, while others would receive only sugar pills.

The study was conducted in a double-blind format, meaning neither the patients, nor the doctors treating them, would know who was getting which kind of pill. Over a period of eight weeks, patients were periodically hooked up to EEG machines that monitored brain waves.

Researchers were not particularly surprised to find that 52 percent of patients began feeling better while taking the anti-depressants and that a full 38 percent reported improvement after taking the placebo.

The most significant finding was revealed in the patients' brain waves. Patients who responded to the placebo actually showed a significant change in their brain activity, which was different from the kind of change seen in patients who responded to medication.

Dr. Leuchter said the new data proves there's a chemical change in

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**Power of placebos**  
The power of suggestion is sometimes enough to make people feel better.

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the brain associated with the placebo effect. However, whether the change is the cause of a patient's improvement, or the other way around, is unclear.

At the end of eight weeks, all patients were told if they were taking the placebo or the anti-depressant. The vast majority of placebo patients who had earlier reported improvement suddenly reported a relapse and asked to be put on anti-depressants.

Dr. Leuchter stresses that his findings do not suggest that placebos alone can, or should, be used to treat depression. Rather, he said the information culled from the research might be used in conjunction with existing treatments – medication and counseling -- to better harness the power of the mind in the healing process.

"We like to think that we give people treatments and they get better, but we don't actually know in any individual why they get better. However, one of the factors is undoubtedly the time we spend with people and the feeling of being connected, which that gives patients," Dr. Leuchter said.

For more information, contact



[UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute](#)

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