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## Depression Patients Show Physical Placebo Effect

By Jay Wrolstad  
NewsFactor Network  
January 10, 2002

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Patients who improved with placebo treatment showed increased activity in the brain; those who improved with medication showed suppressed brain activity.

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Using a cutting-edge brain scan technique called "quantitative electroencephalography (QEEG) imaging," UCLA researchers conducted a nine-week examination of electrical activity in the brain among patients treated for depression with a placebo and among those treated with antidepressant medication.

"Our study shows, for the first time, that among those patients who did show improvement after receiving placebo treatment, the prefrontal area of the brain became more active, while those who received medication showed suppressed brain activity as their conditions improved," Leuchter said.

### [Many Paths to Improvement](#)

The medicinal power of positive thinking has been demonstrated by researchers who contend that patients suffering from depression have a noticeable, positive physical response to placebo, or "sugar pill," treatment, that significantly differs from reactions to medication.

"We have always thought that the positive effect of placebos on patients was based on a psychological process, not a physical process," Dr. Andrew Leuchter told NewsFactor. Leuchter is lead author of the study published in the [American Journal of Psychiatry](#) and director of adult psychiatry at the [UCLA Neuropsychiatric](#)



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This, he said, indicates that there may be multiple pathways to improvement for sufferers of depression -- some involving medication to suppress the abnormal brain activity and others using treatments that increase such activity.

Both medicines and placebo are effective in relieving symptoms in patients, said Leuchter, but they work through different and possibly complementary mechanisms.

"There may well be other treatments that have the same effect as placebo, which involves a positive attitude in the patient who seeks out treatment and believes that it will work and is in continual contact with a physician," Leuchter said. "We need to determine which aspects of this treatment are particularly effective and apply them."

The findings also could be used to assist the development of new drugs, which require placebo studies in their trials, by determining which individuals are getting better with a medication. And, said Leuchter, they demonstrate why people suffering from depression should not alter their regimen when seeking an effective treatment.

#### Placebo or Prozac?

According to the study, some 30 percent to 60 percent of patients with illnesses ranging from the physical to the psychological report a significant improvement in their symptoms after receiving a bogus drug, though little was understood about this placebo effect.

To find the answers, the UCLA study involved 51 individuals with major depression, each of whom was enrolled in one of two separate, nine-week controlled studies. Overall, 52 percent (13 of 25) of the subjects receiving antidepressants -- either fluoxetine, commonly known as Prozac, or venlafaxine, known as Effexor -- responded to treatment, while 38 percent (10 of 26) of those receiving placebos responded, the study states.

A series of five QEEG recordings measuring electrical activity in the prefrontal cortex, which Leuchter said is the region of the brain associated with the regulation of mood, were performed on each subject during treatment. This QEEG takes standard electroencephalography (EEG) readings and digitizes them for more precise measurements, he said.

#### Loss of Faith

After eight weeks of blind testing, when the subjects were told either that they had been given a placebo or medication, the research team noted a dramatic change.

"The individuals taking a placebo lost all of the improvement they had made and had a recurrence of their symptoms," Leuchter said. "We believe it is reasonable to suppose that a belief in treatment is an important component of the placebo response. The expectation of getting better contributed greatly to improvement." **END**



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