

The power of imagination: Neural effects of imagined placebo intake

ABSTRACT:

Background

A commonly established protocol for the administration of open-label placebos (OLPs) – placebos honestly prescribed – emphasizes the necessity of ingesting the pill for the placebo effect to manifest.

Aims

The current functional magnetic resonance imaging study used a novel approach to OLP administration: the imaginary intake of an OLP pill for regulating disgust.

Method

A total of 99 females were randomly allocated to one of three groups that either swallowed a placebo pill (OLP Pill), imagined the intake of a placebo pill (Imaginary Pill) or passively viewed (PV) repulsive and neutral images.

Results

The imaginary pill reduced reported disgust more effectively than the OLP pill and was also perceived as a more plausible method to reduce emotional distress. Relative to the OLP pill, the imaginary pill lowered neural activity in a region of interest involved in disgust processing: the pallidum. No significant differences in brain activation were found when comparing the OLP pill with PV.

Conclusions

These findings highlight that imagining the intake of an OLP emerged as a superior method for regulating feelings of disgust compared to the actual ingestion of a placebo pill. The study's innovative approach sheds new light on the potential of placebo interventions in emotion regulation.

Keywords

Placebo, Nondeceptive, Imagery, Emotion regulation

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Published Work:

Schienle, A., Kogler, W., Seibel, A., & Wabnegger, A. (2023). The pill you don't have to take that is still effective: Neural correlates of imaginary placebo intake for regulating disgust. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 19(1), nsae021. doi:10.1093/scan/nsae021

Schienle, A., & Wabnegger, A. (2024). Neural correlates of expected and perceived treatment efficacy concerning open-label placebos for reducing emotional distress. *Brain Research Bulletin*, 219, 111121. doi:10.1016/j.brainresbull.2024.111121

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