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Placebo Effects in Chronic Pain Patients

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The present thesis focused on the examination of the placebo effects for experimentally induced and chronic pain in chronic pain patients. We conducted a pharmacological placebo paradigm with two patient groups (group 1 = verbal instruction (VI); group 2 = verbal instruction + classical conditioning (VI +CC)) and gained new insights into placebo analgesia in chronic pain patients.

We showed that chronic pain patients in both groups develop placebo effects for experimentally induced pressure pain and for chronic pain via verbal instruction only and via verbal instruction paired with classical conditioning. Against our expectations we found no significant differences in the development of the experimental or chronic pain intensity (placebo response) between the groups VI and VI + CC during the experiment, even though group VI + CC was conditioned (received a lower intensity of pressure stimulation during the intervention block). We also showed that the magnitude of the placebo effect for experimental pain did not significantly correlate with the magnitude of the placebo effect for chronic pain. Furthermore, we could not find significant differences between placebo effect responders and non-responders in the means of chronic pain duration, amount of depressive symptoms, general attitude towards pain medication, and general and specific experience regarding analgesic therapy. Additionally, in placebo effect responders we showed a significant positive correlation between the placebo response to experimental pain and the duration of chronic pain, general attitude towards pain medication and general experience regarding analgesic therapy. These effects were not found for the placebo effect for chronic pain. Specific experience with medication (treatment history) had no significant effect on the placebo response for experimental pain but we showed that patients with a negative specific experience developed larger placebo responses for chronic pain. Further findings were that the magnitude of the placebo effect for experimental or chronic pain did not seem to be affected by the amount of depressive symptoms. We assume that our results on placebo analgesia in chronic pain patients may contribute to the future clinical use of placebo analgesia in patients with persistent pain.