

## Placebo

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*Placebo* is an abused word in trials. The most egregious misuses stem from use as an adjective, eg, as in *placebo patient* or *placebo group* – meaning, strictly speaking, a sugar-coated person or group.

There is treatment involving use of a placebo but there is no *placebo treatment*. It is common to use placebos in trials as a masking device to keep patient and clinic staff from knowing whether the substance being tested is an active drug or matching placebo, but the "treatment" a person receives, is "best medical care" plus the assigned treatment. For example, all persons enrolled in the UGDP received counseling regarding an antidiabetic diet plus the assigned treatment.

**placebo** *adj* - 1. Of or relating to the use or administration of a **placebo**. 2. Of or relating to something considered to be useless or ineffective. *Usage note:* Limit use to the sense of defn 1. Avoid nonsensical uses such as when the term serves as an adjective for patient or group, as in **placebo patient** or **placebo group**; use **placebo-assigned** or **placebo-treated** instead. See also notes for **placebo** and **placebo patient**.

**placebo** *n* - [ME, fr L, I shall please, fr *placēre* to please; the first word of the first antiphon of the service for the dead, I shall please the Lord in the land of the living, fr Roman Catholic vespers] 1. A pharmacologically **inactive substance** given as a substitute for an **active substance**, especially when the person taking or receiving it is not informed whether it is an **active** or **inactive substance**. 2. **placebo treatment** (defn 1) 3. A sugar-coated pill made of lactose or some other pharmacologically inert substance. 4. Any medication considered to be useless, especially one administered in pill form. 5. **nil treatment** 6. An ineffective treatment. *rt:* **double placebo, experimental placebo, homeopathic dose, multiple placebo, nocebo, placebo treatment, sham, sham procedure, therapeutic placebo** *Usage note:* Subject to varying use. Avoid in the sense of defns 4, 5, and 6; best not used interchangeably with **sham** (see usage note for **sham**). The use of a placebo should not be construed to imply the absence of treatment. Virtually all **clinical trials** involve care and investigators conducting them are obligated to meet standards of care, regardless of **treatment assignment** and whether masked or not. As a result, a **control treatment** involving use of a placebo is best thought of as a care regimen with placebo substituting for one element of the care regimen. Labels such as **placebo patient** or **placebo group** create the impression that patients assigned to receive placebos are left untreated. The labels (in addition to being wrong in the literal sense of usage; see **placebo patient** for comment) are misleading when placebo treatment is in addition to other treatments (eg, as in the University Group Diabetes Program<sup>1</sup> where all patients received dietary counseling or in a **vaccine trial** where infants receive vaccines for diphtheria and tetanus in addition to a pertussis vaccine or matching placebo). See also **placebo treatment**.

**placebo group** *n* - 1. **placebo-assigned group** 2. **placebo-treated group** 3. A group not receiving or not having received any **treatment**. *Usage note:* Avoid for the reasons stated in the usage note for **placebo patient**.

**placebo patient** *n* - 1. **placebo-assigned patient** 2. **placebo-treated patient** 3. A **study patient** who does not receive any **treatment**. *Usage note:* Literally, a sugar-coated patient, ala defn 3 for **placebo**. Use **placebo-assigned patient** or **placebo-treated patient** for uses in the sense of defns 1 and 2, respectively; avoid in the sense of defn 3.

**placebo treatment** *n* - 1. A **treatment** involving the use of a **placebo**. 2. **placebo-control treatment** (defn 1) 3. An ineffective or useless **treatment** used as a **control treatment** (not recommended usage). *syn:* **mock treatment** *rt:* **adjunctive treatment, control treatment, experimental placebo, sham treatment, therapeutic placebo** *Usage note:* Subject to misuse when used in the

sense of defn 3. Not to be confused with **nontreatment** as represented in trials with a **nil treatment control**. Also not to be confused with **sham treatment**. Use of the adjective modifier **placebo** should be reserved for settings in which a placebo is actually used, as in the sense of defns 1 or 2 for **placebo**.

Other related words or terms

**placebo control** *n* - 1. **placebo-control treatment** 2. A **treatment** involving the use of a **placebo**.  
*Usage note:* See **placebo treatment**.

**placebo effect** *n* - 1. The **effect** produced by a **placebo**; assessed or measured against the effect expected or observed in the absence of any **treatment**. 2. The effect produced by an **inactive control treatment**, especially one involving use of a placebo. 3. The effect produced by a **control treatment** considered to be **nil** or ineffective. 4. An effect attributed to a placebo; an effect attributable to a placebo. rt: **sham effect** *Usage note:* Limit usage to settings involving the actual use of a placebo. Avoid in the sense of defns 2 and 3 when the control treatment does not involve use of a placebo.

**placebo lead-in period** *n* - [trials] A **lead-in period** in which persons receive a **placebo treatment** (as in the Coronary Drug Project [Coronary Drug Project Research Group, 1973]<sup>2</sup>) for a time prior to **enrollment** and **treatment assignment**; typically done to help identify **compliant** individuals. See Brittain and Wittes [1990]<sup>3</sup> for discussion of the usefulness of such strategies. syn: placebo run-in period rt: **lead-in period**, **shakedown period**

**placebo period** *n* - [trials] A **period** of time in which a person (**treatment unit**), to be **enrolled** or already enrolled, receives a **placebo** (usually administered either in **single-** or **double-masked** fashion); when such a period precedes **treatment assignment**, usually referred to as **placebo lead-in period** or as **placebo run-in period** and used to aid in the selection of **compliant** persons or to facilitate the assessment of **eligibility**. Periods occurring after **enrollment** may arise in relation to **washouts** or cessations of **assigned treatment** in relation to episodes of intercurrent illnesses. rt: **lead-in period**, **shakedown period**

**placebo reactor** *n* - 1. A person who reports **side effects** normally associated with the **test treatment** while receiving a **placebo**. 2. A person who reacts to a **placebo** as indicated by symptoms or complaints similar to those experienced with the **test treatment(s)**.

placebo run-in period *n* - **placebo lead-in period**

**placebo treatment effect** *n* - 1. The **effect** produced, or capable of being produced, by a **placebo treatment** (defn 1). 2. The effect produced, or capable of being produced, by an **inactive control treatment**; **placebo treatment** (defn 3). *Usage note:* Subject to misuse when used in the sense of defn 2. Use of the adjective modifier **placebo** should be reserved for settings in which a placebo is actually used, as in the sense of defns 1 or 2 for **placebo**.

**placebo washout** *n* - Administration of a **placebo** for a defined **period** of time following administration of a **test treatment** to allow time for re-establishment of a **baseline**. Common in **crossover trials** following each treatment and prior to administration of the next one; usually administered in **single-masked** or **double-masked** fashion. rt: **washout period**

**placebo-assigned** *adj* - 1. Of, related to, or being **assigned** to receive a **placebo treatment**. 2. Of,

related to, or being assigned to receive an **inactive treatment**. rt: **placebo-treated** *Usage note:* Use only in the sense of defn 1; avoid as an adjective modifier in the sense of defn 2 except when a **placebo** (defns 1 or 2) is used. See **placebo treatment** for added comments.

**placebo-assigned group** *n* - [trials] 1. The **group** of persons or **treatment units** assigned to a **placebo-control treatment** (defn 1). 2. The group of persons or treatment units assigned to an **inactive control treatment**. rt: **placebo-assigned patient, placebo-treated group** *Usage note:* Use only in the sense of defn 1; avoid in the sense of defn 2 when a **placebo** (defns 1 or 2) is not used. See **placebo treatment** for added comments.

**placebo-assigned patient** *n* - [trial] 1. A **patient assigned** to receive a **placebo treatment**. 2. A patient assigned to receive an **inactive control treatment**. rt: **placebo-assigned group, placebo-treated patient** *Usage note:* Use only in the sense of defn 1; avoid in the sense of defn 2 when a **placebo** (defns 1 or 2) is not used. See **placebo treatment** for added comments.

**placebo-control** *adj* - Of, related to, or concerned with a **placebo control**.

**placebo-control treatment** *n* - 1. An **inactive control treatment** involving administration of a **placebo** in **single-masked** or **double-masked** fashion. 2. Any **inactive control treatment**, including those not involving administration of a placebo. rt: **study treatment** *Usage note:* Use in the sense of defn 1. Avoid in the sense of defn 2 when a **placebo** is not used. See **placebo treatment** for added comments.

**placebo-controlled** *adj* - Of, relating to, or being **controlled** by use of a **placebo**.

**placebo-controlled clinical trial** *n* - 1. A **clinical trial** in which the **control treatment** involves the administration of a **placebo**. 2. A clinical trial involving an **inactive control treatment**. *Usage note:* Avoid in the sense of defn 2 except when a **placebo** (defns 1 or 2) is used. See **placebo treatment** for added comments.

**placebo-controlled trial** *n* - 1. A **trial** in which the **control treatment** involves the administration of a **placebo**. 2. A trial involving an **inactive control treatment**. *Usage note:* Avoid in the sense of defn 2 except where a **placebo** (defns 1 or 2) is used. See **placebo treatment** for added comments.

**placebo-treated** *adj* - 1. **placebo-assigned** (defn 1) 2. Of, related to, or being **treated** with a **placebo**. 3. Of, related to, or being treated with an **inactive treatment**. rt: **placebo-assigned** *Usage note:* Use only in the sense of defn 2; avoid as an adjective modifier in the sense of defn 3 except where a **placebo** (defns 1 or 2) is used. Use **placebo-assigned** instead of **placebo-treated** when used in the sense of defn 1. See **placebo treatment** for added comments.

**placebo-treated group** *n* - [trials] 1. The group of persons or treatment assignment units receiving or that have received a **placebo** (defns 1 or 2). 2. The group of persons or treatment units that receive an **inactive control treatment**. 3. The **group** of persons or **treatment assignment units** assigned to a **placebo-control treatment; placebo-assigned group**. 4. The group of persons or treatment units assigned to receive an inactive control treatment. rt: **placebo-treated patient, placebo-assigned group** *Usage note:* Subject to misuse. Use only in the sense of defn 1. Often used in the sense of defn 3 as a synonym for **placebo-assigned group** (defn 1); avoid by using **placebo-assigned group** (since there may not be a one-to-one correspondence between being

placebo-assigned and being placebo-treated). Avoid in the sense of defn 4; use **placebo-assigned group** if the inactive treatment involves use of a **placebo** (defns 1 or 2). Avoid in the sense of defn 2 when a **placebo** (defns 1 or 2) is not used. See **placebo treatment** for added comments.

**placebo-treated patient** *n* - 1. A **patient** receiving a **placebo** (defns 1 or 2). 2. A patient receiving an **inactive control treatment**. 3. A **patient** assigned to a **placebo-control treatment; placebo-assigned patient**. 4. A patient assigned to an **inactive control treatment**. rt: **placebo-treated group, placebo-assigned patient** *Usage note*: Subject to misuse. Use only in the sense of defn 1. Often used in the sense of defn 3 as a synonym for **placebo-assigned patient** (defn 1); avoid by using **placebo-assigned patient** (since usually there is not a one-to-one correspondence between being placebo-assigned and being placebo-treated). Avoid in the sense of defn 2 when a **placebo** (defns 1 or 2) is not used. Avoid in the sense of defn 4; use **placebo-assigned patient** when a **placebo** (defns 1 or 2) is used. See **placebo treatment** for added comments.

#### References

- 1 **University Group Diabetes Program Research Group**: A Study of the effects of hypoglycemic agents on vascular complications in patients with adult-onset diabetes: I. Design, methods and baseline characteristics. Diabetes 19 (suppl 2):747-783, **1970a**.
- 2 **Coronary Drug Project Research Group**: The Coronary Drug Project: Design, Methods, and Baseline Results. Circulation 47 (suppl 1):I-1-I-50, **1973**.
- 3 **Brittain E, Wittes J**: The run-in period in clinical trials. Controlled Clin Trials 11:327-338, **1990**.