

Complementary Approaches: Hypnosis

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Intro and Background

Mind-body techniques are slowly gaining acceptance in mainstream medicine as effective ways of lessening the secondary side effects and symptoms of various diseases. Different types of these mind-body techniques include hypnosis, relaxation techniques, meditation, guided imagery, and biofeedback. Hypnosis can be defined as a procedure in which a therapist suggests that a patient experience changes in sensation, thought, and behavior that may not be accessible normally to the conscious mind.¹ Not everyone can be hypnotized, as some people are more prone to suggestibility than others.² Adverse reactions to hypnosis depend on the individual and include headache, reenactment of an emotionally difficult past event, and memory loss.² It is not known exactly how hypnosis works, but it appears to work on the region of the brain that is responsible for consciousness.⁴

Scientific Research

In cancer patients, hypnosis and other mind-body techniques have been shown to improve quality of life, mood, and coping ability.⁵ Substantial evidence indicates that hypnosis can treat pain, anxiety, hot flashes, nausea, and vomiting.^{6 7 8 9 10 2} Some studies show that hypnosis effectively treats pain caused by medical procedures in cancer patients, though more research is needed to provide conclusive evidence.¹¹ Hypnosis can treat pain and anxiety in children, studies have found.¹²

One review found that hypnosis sessions given during cancer treatment (for example, during a six-week course of radiation, not after completion of the six-week treatment) decreased cancer-related fatigue better than any other complementary/alternative treatment studied.¹³ In addition, a small study suggests that autogenic training, a type of hypnosis, can strengthen the immune system of cancer patients.¹⁴ However, studies have not been able to show that this change improves survival time or decreases disease progression.¹⁵

Currently, clinical studies are investigating how well hypnosis can help side effects of cancer and cancer treatment such as hot flashes, dry mouth, anxiety, and decreased quality of life.¹⁶ One trial found that hypnosis, in combination with massage therapy and healing touch, did not increase quality of life or mental health score in cancer patients; it appears to have *decreased* these measures, though statistical results for significance are not provided.¹⁷ Conversely, thirteen trials have found that hypnosis positively influences distress; some of these also found positive effects on pain and fatigue.¹⁸ For information about ongoing clinical trials involving hypnosis, please visit our section on [Finding Clinical Trials](#).

NIH Recommendation

The National Institutes of Health recommends hypnosis for the treatment of chronic pain and insomnia,¹⁹ and its National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health has an [online section on hypnosis](#). This section recommends a paper published in the American College of Chest Physicians' journal *Chest*, which notes that "[h]ypnosis has been studied extensively and has been consistently found to be effective for a wide range of symptoms in cancer care." The article recommends that physicians use "mind-body modalities" like hypnosis as complementary therapies for reducing symptoms like pain, anxiety, and chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting in cancer patients.²⁰

Please be sure to see our [notice on complementary therapies](#). To better understand and evaluate the research described above, read our [Introduction to Scientific Research](#).

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