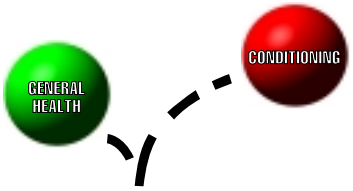
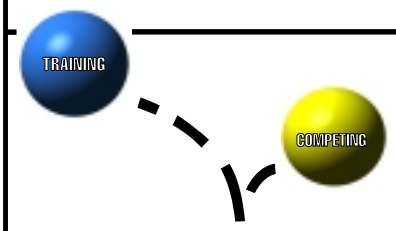
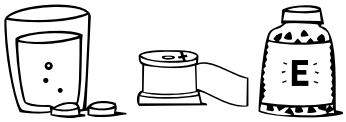


Your Nutrition Game Plan



The Power of Placebo



Joe hated lifting weights. He began taking a supplement used by national champions. Joe believed it helped him in the weight room. He had record gains during off-season conditioning. Laboratory analysis of the supplement showed it was only sand.

You have sprained your ankle. The pain is so severe that you become convinced something far more serious is wrong. Your physician, in whom you have complete confidence, thoroughly examines the sprain, takes an x-ray, assures you that it is only a sprain and that the pain should diminish. As you leave the office, the pain doesn't seem to be as bad.

These situations are explained by the placebo effect. A placebo can be anything from a behavior (wearing lucky socks), to a substance (pill) to a suggestion (advice from an expert). It is something that you or I believe will help or harm us. Placebo is Latin for "I shall please."

Research has shown that a placebo can affect colds, asthma, pain, high blood pressure, heart disease, and sports performance.

In the past, the word placebo had negative connotations — quackery, deception, or lacking authenticity. Placebos were sugar pills prescribed by doctors to appease bothersome patients who weren't really sick. People thought that placebo meant that it wasn't real. However, it is now known that *placebos can actually cause real physical changes.*

For example, a study was carried out on individuals who were extremely allergic to poison ivy. Each was touched on the arm with a harmless leaf they were told was poison ivy and all 13 reacted to it.

Placebos might affect athletic performance by influencing physical change directly, or simply by motivating the athlete to train harder and eat better. Placebo effect may explain part of the disagreement between what science says should happen and what really happens.

Athletes may swear by a supplement (for example, amino acids) or a practice (for example, nose strips for breathing better). Scientists would say those things have no scientific merit. The reality is, if the athlete strongly believes the supplement or practice works, if it is taken away, performance will drop. Why? Placebo effect – the athlete's beliefs were causing real physical changes.

The number of people who respond to a placebo varies greatly. Commonly, 1/3 of any group is thought to respond to placebo, but research has shown the response rate can vary from zero to 100%.

Placebo effect can help or hinder athletes. It is helpful when it aids performance and is without risk. It can be detrimental when too much importance is placed on a placebo instead of skill, talent, training and mental preparation.

Understanding that the placebo phenomenon is at work during every aspect of your training and competition can help you use the power of placebo to help, not hinder, your performance.

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