



Magnet therapy. Really?

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To someone dealing with recurring or persistent pain, the promise of relief will resonate loudly, often with no evi-

dence to back up the claims. And when someone makes claims that the ‘therapy’ they offer will solve all their problems, it can be difficult to question the claims. That is where we are with so-called magnetic therapy.

For thousands of years magnets have been touted as the solution for so many health problems. Unfortunately, just because it’s been tried (and so-claimed) does not make it any more rational. The short answer about whether magnets will help with your pain is simple: they won’t. A more detailed answer: they still won’t.

Marketing promises for magnetic therapy range from bracelets that can rescue you from arthritis pain to other benefits via magnetic jewelry, belts, insoles, blankets, all purported to provide amazing benefits. Don’t be fooled. The claims are only about getting your money, not any real treatment.

There are two types of magnets. First, the static ones that once magnetized stay that way permanently. The second type are electromagnets which comprise of a coil of wire wrapped around a metal core that becomes magnetized only when a current is applied. The claims we are bombarded with relate to static magnets in all manners of application. These supposedly penetrate the body to alter the nervous system, boost blood flow and do other pain-relieving magic.

Magnetic therapy has undergone some study and any successes have come from isolated sources which have not offered proof, just claims. Most of the positive ‘evidence’ comes from a small 1997 study at Baylor College of Medicine that reported some reduction in pain of

people who had recovered from polio. There were problems with the study’s methods that make the results hard to support. To date, no large, well-designed studies have been carried out.

Much as we could hope, there is no evidence that static magnets help with pain. If there are any benefits, they come from the placebo effect or from the symptoms simply resolving themselves.

The other type of magnet, however, has shown some promise and sound evidence of success. Transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) uses electromagnets to treat depression that has not responded to antidepressant medication. TMS delivers high-intensity electromagnetic pulses to the part of the brain associated with depression.

A device was licensed in 2008 by the FDA in the US for this purpose to be used only under medical supervision. The therapy has shown promise but not all results were positive, though results were “better than a sham treatment.”

Conversely, the FDA refuses to accredit the marketing of magnets with claims of health benefits. Indeed, they have taken action against several makers and sellers of magnets because they were making unproven health claims.

The bottom line is that static magnets have no ability to resolve pain or other ailments of the body. If there is any benefit, it is in your own mind via the placebo effect. But if the problem is depression and drug therapy has not helped, consider talking to your mental health professional about TMS.

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