

## Key Points

1. Distant healing techniques are very popular in the US and UK
2. These include Reiki, prayer, shamanism, and therapeutic touch to name a few
3. Study identified and reviewed all published reports on distant healing between 2000-2002
4. Identified 8 non-random studies and 9 randomized studies
5. All non-random studies had structural and methodological problems
6. 6 of the randomized studies demonstrated NO beneficial effects of distant healing
7. Although the question is still open, there is little evidence that distant healing techniques are beneficial

## Definitions

**control group** - in a study, a group of subjects who are used as a basis for comparison; the control group is usually healthy, or does not receive a treatment that the experimental group receives

**distant healing** - term for any of a number of healing techniques such as Reiki, faith healing, prayer, etc.

**intercessory prayer** - praying on behalf of someone else, in this context to help healing

**faith healing** - healing through faith and belief in a God or Divine Power

**placebo** - a fake medicine - which has no effect - used in scientific studies as a control

**placebo effect** - in a study, a real effect observed due to a placebo, often attributed to the subjects thinking and believing they are taking medicine

**prospective** - type of study where the experiment is designed before the data is collected

## Does Distant Healing Work?

According to published reports, Americans are turning more and more to alternative medicines, either as an adjunct or outright replacement for traditional care. Surveys have shown that some of the more popular healing techniques are those that can be categorized as distant healing: energy healing (such as Reiki or therapeutic touch), faith healing, shamanism, and intercessory prayer to name a few. One survey showed that as many 14% of American adults employ one such technique at least yearly. Their popularity is not limited to the US either, there are close to 16,000 healers registered with some type of professional organization in the UK.

As with many alternative medicines - such as acupuncture - evaluating the effectiveness of distant healing can be difficult. Published studies often don't employ rigorous designs, leaving their results open to interpretation. A survey of the literature on distant healing from 1966-2000 (Astin et al., published in 2000) found that although more than 50% of the reviewed studies showed a statistically significant positive effect for distant healing, it was difficult to draw definitive conclusions because of the limitations of the underlying studies.

Perhaps even more problematic is the belief by some that science shouldn't be used to evaluate things that rely on faith. Most distant healing techniques are an extension of a religious or spiritual belief. So if something is based on faith, by definition, how it can be examined using science?

Adding fuel to the fire, one of the authors of the 2000 review has recently published an updated review of the literature which includes more rigorous studies. Edzard Ernst, at the University of Exeter, U.K., examined 17 studies of distant healing techniques published between 2000-2002. Ernst published his findings in the April 30, 2003 issue of The Middle European Journal of Medicine.

Ernst categorized the 17 studies into 8 non-randomized studies and 9 randomized studies. In examining the non-randomized ones - considered less rigorous scientifically - Ernst found that the conclusions drawn in these studies were often overly ambitious, misleading, or even meaningless.

In examining the more rigorous randomized trials, Ernst found that 6 of the 9 reported finding that the healing techniques studied demonstrated no beneficial effect. The six studies, combined, encompassed over 1200 patients and included techniques such as spiritual healing, intercessory prayer, and therapeutic touch.

One of the studies which found no effect (Blankfield et al.) looked at the effect of therapeutic touch on people suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome. The study involved 21 patients who were randomly assigned to receive either genuine therapeutic touch or a sham therapy, once a week for six weeks. At the end of the study, there was no difference between the two groups in regards to nerve function, pain, or overall relaxation level.

A second study which found no effect (Abbot et al) looked at the use spiritual healing for chronic pain patients. One hundred ten pain patients were randomly assigned to receive either genuine spiritual healing, fake healing using an actor, real healing through a one-way mirror, or no healing through the mirror. The patients went through 8 weekly sessions and their pain levels were recorded. The study found that although every group responded with a large placebo effect, there was no discernible difference between the groups.

The most bizarre study reviewed was a well designed experiment which used retroactive intervention. In this study (Leibovici), 3,393 patient charts were randomly assigned - in the year 2000 - to receive either prayer or no prayer. The thing is, the charts represented patients who had blood infections between 1990-1996. The study looked to see if mortality, length of hospital visit, and duration of fever differed between the prayer and non-prayer groups. To everyone's surprise, there was a significant difference between the groups. Ernst writes off these results as nonsensical, and even the author of the original study does not claim that prayer can change past events.

When taken collectively, there is little evidence that distant healing techniques have any beneficial effect (beyond a potential placebo effect). Ernst, however, isn't ready to close the book. He believes the question is still open and recommends more rigorously designed studies to examine each technique individually.

As for whether the scientific method should be used to study these techniques at all...that remains a question of faith.

## From The National Center For Complementary And Alternative Medicines

### Reiki Clinical Trials:

**randomized** - technique used in a scientific study where participants are randomly assigned to one of two groups; used to control the effects of age, gender, etc. on the study outcome

**Reiki** - healing technique where the healer uses touch to direct and channel energy to the patient; literally means universal life energy

**retrospective** - type of scientific study which looks back in time, often at medical records

**shaman** - has many different uses, but in general a spiritual/religious leader who can heal people; medicine man, wizard, etc.

**therapeutic touch** - form of energy healing where there is no actual physical contact between the healer and the patient

- [Efficacy of Reiki in the Treatment of Fibromyalgia](#)
- [Effects of Reiki on Painful Neuropathy and Cardiovascular Risk Factors](#)
- [Reiki/Energy Healing in Prostate Cancer](#)
- [The Use of Reiki for Patients with Advanced AIDS](#)

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