

# Can over-the-counter pain meds influence thoughts and emotions?

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Over-the-counter pain medicine such as Ibuprofen and acetaminophen may influence how people process information, experience hurt feelings, and react to emotionally evocative images, according to recent studies.

Examining these findings and how policymakers should respond, a new article is out today in *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, a Federation of Associations in Behavioral & Brain Sciences (FABBS) journal.

Article authors Ratner et al. reviewed previous research suggesting that over-the-counter [pain](#) medicine may influence [individuals](#):

- Sensitivity to emotionally painful experiences: Compared to those who took placebos, women who took a dose of ibuprofen reported less hurt [feelings](#) from emotionally painful experiences, such as being excluded from a game or writing about a time when they were betrayed. Men showed the opposite pattern.
- Ability to empathize with the pain of others: Compared to those taking placebos, individuals who took a dose of acetaminophen were less emotionally distressed while reading about a person experiencing physical or [emotional pain](#) and felt less regard for the person.
- Ability to process information: Compared to those who took placebos, individuals who took a dose of acetaminophen made more errors of omission in a game where they were asked, at various times, either to perform or to not perform a task.
- Reactions to emotional objects: Individuals who took a dose of acetaminophen rated pleasant and unpleasant photographs less extremely than those who took placebos.
- Discomfort from parting with possessions: When asked to set a selling price on an object they owned, individuals who took a dose of [acetaminophen](#) set prices that were cheaper than the prices set by individuals who took placebos.

"In many ways, the reviewed findings are alarming," wrote Ratner et al. "Consumers assume that when they take an over-the-counter pain medication, it will relieve their physical symptoms, but they do not

anticipate broader psychological effects."

The authors also wrote that while the medicine could have new potential for helping people deal with hurt feelings, more research is needed to examine the efficacy and determine if it would have negative effects for people who take it in combination with other medicines or who are depressed and have difficulty feeling pleasure.

While they emphasize that further studies are necessary before policymakers consider new regulations or policies, they recommend for policymakers to begin to think about potential public health risks and benefits in case preliminary studies are confirmed.

**More information:** "Can Over-the-Counter Pain Medications Influence Our Thoughts and Emotions?," by Ratner et al., in *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*.

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