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## Drumming and the immune system - Shorts

[Townsend Letter for Doctors and Patients](#), [Dec, 2002](#) by [Jule Klotter](#)

A study published in *Alternative Therapies* (January 2001) by Barry Bittman, MD, and researchers from Loma Linda, and O. Carl Simonton, director of the Simonton Cancer Center (Pacific Palisades, CA), found that a lighthearted group drumming session altered neuroendocrine and immunologic measurements in the participants. Drumming was chosen because percussion activities require little musical training or experience. In addition, group drumming has been used in many cultures throughout history in healing rituals and to bring people together physically and energetically.

Dr. Bittman and colleagues chose to study "composite" drumming after investigating several types of group drumming, including shamanic drumming, basic drum sessions with differing instruction-to-activity ratios, and the composite protocol that uses guided imagery. The drumming groups were also compared to a group of subjects who listened to drumming music recorded from an experimental session and to a group who simply read books or periodicals. In an interview with Remo Belli, founder of Remo Drums, Inc., which funded the research, Dr. Bittman stated: "...we were surprised by the fact our preliminary studies didn't turn out the way we expected. Cortisol, which predictably increases under stressful circumstances, went down in all of our trials as expected. Yet NK cell activity did not necessarily rise as initially expected when cortisol levels dropped." This finding was especially surprising since previous research had shown that exercise on its own can increase natural killer cell (NK) activity. The researchers chose the composite drumming protocol for further research because it alone increased NK activity even though some of the groups required more physical exercise.

Half of the 111 age- and sex-matched volunteer subjects (mean age 30.4 years) in the study were put in the composite drumming group and the other half were used as controls. The control subjects sat in chairs, arranged in a circle, and read magazines or newspapers provided for them. Forty-five minutes before the intervention, subjects in groups of ten gave blood samples and completed the Beck Anxiety Inventory and the Beck Depression Inventory II. Each drumming session began with the passing of 'shaker eggs' (plastic eggs containing sand or gravel) from hand to hand. The facilitating music therapist or clinician fostered a lighthearted camaraderie and nonjudgmental atmosphere among the group by encouraging them to increase the rate of transfer until they could no longer maintain the pace without dropping them. Next, each participant chose a hand drum to use. After brief instruction, they were to tap out a simple rhythm (e.g. the syllables in their name). Then, the facilitator led the group in various rhythms and tempos for 20 minutes. The final portion of the hour session consisted of two descriptive stories (each about 15 minutes long). As the stories were being told, the facilitator led the participants in drumming rhythms and tempos that fit the spoken imagery. Afterwards, subjects gave another blood sample and completed the Beck

The pre- and post- Beck surveys showed no change. The Coherence Scale "showed no significant difference between the treatment group and control group. The group drumming-guided imagery session increased dehydroepiandrosterone-to-cortisol ratios, increased natural killer cell activity, and increased lymphokine-activated killer cell activity without altering plasma interleukin 2 or interferongamma."

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Bittman, Barry B., MD; Berk, Lee S., MPH, DrPH; Felten, David L., MD, PhD; Westengard, James, BS; Simonton, O. Carl, MD; Pappas, James, MD; Ninehouse, Melissa, BS. Composite Effects of Group Drumming Music Therapy on Modulation of Neuroendocrine-Immune Parameters in Normal Subjects. *Alternative Therapies* 2001 January; vol7, No 1: pp38-47

Bittman, Dr. Barry & Belli, Rome. Drumming Research. [www.remo.com/health](http://www.remo.com/health)

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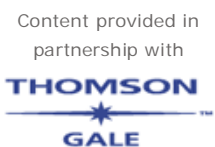
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