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Music as Medicine

Got pain? Got the blues? Try the music cure

by Sarí N. Harrar

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Intro

A 79-year-old stroke survivor learns to walk again as the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" guides his legs.

A woman with terrible **insomnia** now slips into dreamland courtesy of Pachelbel's timeless Canon in D.

In a hospital intensive-care unit, patients on ventilators who listen to music of their choice actually relax, while those who don't hear music grow more tense.

Exciting research suggests that the brain responds to music almost as if it were medicine. It may regulate some body functions, synchronize motor skills, stimulate the mind--even make us smarter.

What Music Can Do for You

Clinical studies and anecdotal evidence from music therapists suggest that the sound of music...

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- manages pain
- improves mood and mobility of people with Parkinson's disease
- reduces the need for sedatives and pain relievers during and after surgery
- decreases nausea during chemotherapy
- helps patients participate in medical treatment that shortens hospital stays
- relieves anxiety
- lowers blood pressure
- eases depression
- enhances concentration and creativity

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The best part is that to take advantage of music's healing power, you don't need to take a prescription to your local music store. You don't even have to go to the music store at all. The home remedies you need are probably already in your music collection.

"Many years of research have shown me that there is no set prescription, no particular piece of music that will make everyone feel better or more relaxed," says Suzanne Hanser, EdD, chairperson of the music therapy department at Berklee College of Music and a music therapist at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, both in Boston. "What counts is familiarity, musical taste, and the kinds of memories, feelings, and associations a piece of music brings to mind. Some people relax to classical music, others like the Moody Blues. The key is to individualize your musical selections."

Health News Editor Sari Harrar plays the cello and finds Bach extremely calming.

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Sari N. Harrar, former health news editor at *Prevention*, is a freelance writer specializing in health, science, and medicine.

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