Copper bracelets and arthritis: Sorry, no help.

By ACSH Staff — September 20, 2013

It has long been thought, among hopeful perhaps superstitious arthritis sufferers, that wearing copper bracelets might have some healing power to reduce painful joint swelling. However, the medical and scientific basis for this belief is entirely lacking. Now, a new small study purports to further discredit this myth. To a minor extent, it does.

A group of researchers based in Yorkshire, UK, led by Dr. Stewart Richmond of The University of York set out to assess the efficacy (or lack thereof) of copper bracelets to reduce pain and inflammation among 70 patients with active rheumatoid arthritis. The study design also included magnets (another phony cure that has been around forever): the group was divided into four parts, with a rotating treatment regimen consisting of 4 weeks of: copper bracelets, a full-strength magnetic device, a reduced-strength magnet, and a de-magnetized (placebo) device, with a one-week washout period in between.

The results: sadly for those believing in the healing powers of magnets or copper bracelets, not so good. Amongst the 65 participants who provided complete self-report outcome data for all devices, analysis of treatment outcomes did not reveal any statistically significant differences between the four devices in terms of their effects on pain, inflammation, physical function, disease activity, or medication use.

Dr. Richmond noted that wearers of these (and similar unproven and unapproved) devices may be deluded by the common placebo effect; alternatively, they may self-deceive due to timing, as the bracelets are usually employed during a flare-up, and in due course the disease calms down, which is then attributed to the device's effect. Amazingly, given the science, magnets to quell arthritis have a global market of one-billion dollars.

ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross, a former practicing rheumatologist, had this to say: It's quite difficult to convince a rheumatoid arthritis patient to give up her copper bracelets and magnets (most of them are female), evidence aside. And while there is surely no measurable benefit to be derived from them, there is also no risk, and patients cling to them like religious icons. This study is really too small and too brief to lend much support to the many others showing no effect, but it does give me the opportunity to once again denounce their use as a waste of effort and money.