A placebo is a harmless medication that mimics a medication but has no effect on a patient. It is often used in “blind” studies where the patient/client and often the treating veterinarian do not know if a patient is receiving the medicated treatment or the placebo. This provides a comparison between patients receiving a treatment and those not treated but keeping everything else the same. For example, if 100 patients are in a study, 50 may randomly receive the treatment and the others the placebo. All patients receive the same laboratory tests, exams, etc. At the end of the study, the patients’ response or lack of response to treatment are compared. Testing is done to check for effects caused by the medicated treatment compared to patients receiving the placebo.

A “blind” study takes into account the “placebo effect” where owners note improvements just because the patient is receiving a “medication” or extra care due to being in a study. Clients expect results, so observe improvement even when the pet is not receiving any new treatment.

Patients used as “controls” may receive a placebo treatment or a standard treatment. Control patients may be a healthy population of a certain breed to determine the likelihood of developing a certain condition. They may also be patients affected by a disease and randomly receive a placebo instead of a medicated treatment. Both sets of patients are very important to help determine the effectiveness of treatment while advancing knowledge of medical conditions.

For information on all clinical studies, please visit: uwveterinarycare.wisc.edu/clinical-studies