

Brain's pain processing mechanism called into question

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For many years, neuroscientists believed they had identified a specific pattern of brain activity acting as a kind of “signature” for pain in the brain. Recently this so-called “pain matrix” has been [called into question](#), and [a new study](#) by British researchers may have [shattered the myth](#) once and for all.

The pain matrix is actually a cluster of regions in the brain that prior imaging studies indicated are involved in processing pain perception, including the posterior insula and the anterior cingulate cortex. This has been so broadly accepted that the signature pattern has been used to declare that emotional pain ([like social rejection](#)) and physical pain are the same thing, as far as the brain is concerned. The argument goes that something like a bad romantic breakup [has the same effect](#) on brain activity as spilling a hot cup of coffee on your shirt.

[More recent studies](#) have cast doubt on those conclusions, however. And now researchers at the University of Reading and University College London have concluded that this cluster of regions in brain is not specific to pain. It also responds to loud noises, bright lights, a strong non-painful touch (like a firm handshake), and yes, social rejection. They describe their findings in a new paper [published](#) in *JAMA Neurology*.

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