

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Seasonal affective disorder is a cyclic, seasonal condition, which means signs and symptoms are present only during a particular season and then go away. Most of the time, the signs and symptoms of SAD appear during the winter and recede during the spring and summer. If you regularly experience the following signs and symptoms when the seasons change, you may have seasonal affective disorder:

- Depression and/or Anxiety
- Loss of energy
- Social withdrawal
- Increased sleep and sleepiness
- Loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed, including sex
- Overeating, especially foods high in carbohydrates
- Weight gain
- Difficulty concentrating and processing information

These symptoms can indicate other disorders or conditions, so it is very important to talk to a counselor to evaluate these symptoms and determine a plan of action.

LIGHT THERAPY AND SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

One consideration in working with SAD is light therapy. In light therapy, you sit with your eyes open in front of a light box — a small, portable device that contains fluorescent bulbs or tubes. The light box emits a type and intensity of light that isn't found in normal household lighting, so simply sitting in front of a lamp in your living room won't relieve the symptoms of seasonal affective disorder. Light therapy mimics outdoor light and causes a biochemical change in your brain that lifts your mood, relieving symptoms of seasonal affective disorder. Light therapy, also called bright light therapy or phototherapy, has been used to treat seasonal affective disorder since the early 1980s. Many mental health professionals now consider light therapy to be standard treatment for seasonal affective disorder. With daily treatment of light therapy, 80% report improvement.



THE LINK BETWEEN LIGHT AND SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

The precise cause of seasonal affective disorder isn't known, but genetics and your age may be factors. Most evidence, though, suggests that it arises from abnormalities in how your body manages its internal (circadian) biological rhythms or matches those rhythms to the 24-hour day. In particular, the hormone melatonin is thought to play a major role in seasonal affective disorder. Melatonin helps control body temperature, hormone secretion and sleep. It's produced in a specific area of your brain during the hours of darkness. During the low-light months of fall and winter, people with seasonal affective disorder produce more melatonin than normal — enough to cause potentially debilitating symptoms of depression. But exposure to bright light can suppress the brain's production of melatonin, helping regulate your internal clock and reducing symptoms.

SIDE EFFECTS

Side effects from light therapy are uncommon and usually mild. They include: eyestrain, headache, agitation, nausea, insomnia, irritability, fatigue, and dryness. You may be able to manage these problems by reducing treatment time, moving farther from the light box, or changing the time of day you use light therapy. Talk to your counselor for help and advice.

WHO SHOULDN'T USE LIGHT THERAPY?

- Do not use if your skin is sensitive to light
- Do not use if you take medications that react with sunlight, such as certain antibiotics or anti-inflammatory medication
- Do not use if you have an eye condition that makes your eyes vulnerable to light damage

HOW TO USE LIGHT THERAPY

In order for light therapy to work, the light from the light box must enter your eyes indirectly. You can't get the same effect by exposing your skin to the light. But don't look directly at the light box because the light can damage your eyes. The bulbs in the light box are covered with a plastic screen that helps block out potentially harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays that can cause cataracts and skin problems.

Light therapy is most effective when you have the proper combination of intensity, duration and timing:

- Intensity. The intensity of the light box is recorded in lux, which is a measure of the amount of light you receive at a specific distance from a light source. Light boxes for light therapy usually produce between 2,500 lux and 10,000 lux. The light box you will be using at the Counseling & Testing Center has 10,000 lux. In contrast, the lighting in an average living room in the evening is less than 400 lux, while a bright sunny day may register 100,000 lux. The 10,000 lux intensity requires only 30 minutes per session.
- Duration. Light therapy typically involves daily sessions or several times a week.
- Timing. For most people, light therapy is most effective if used during the day (as early as possible), rather than during the evening. Doing light therapy at night can disrupt your sleep.

FINDING TIME

Light therapy requires time and consistency. Some people quit because they don't want to spend a lot of time sitting by a light box. But light therapy can be used while you do other activities. The Counseling & Testing Center SAD light has been placed on a large table that will allow you to read, use a computer, write, talk on the phone, or eat while undergoing light therapy.


WHAT TO EXPECT FROM LIGHT THERAPY

The general recommendation for most people with seasonal affective disorder is to begin treatment with light therapy in the early fall, as soon as the earliest symptoms start, but you can start it at any time during the year. Treatment generally continues until spring, when outdoor light alone is sufficient to sustain a good mood and higher energy. You and your counselor can adjust your light box treatment based on the timing and duration of your symptoms.

STICKING WITH IT

With appropriate light therapy, you may start to feel better within several days. In some cases, though, it can take several weeks. Sticking to a consistent daily routine of light therapy sessions can help ensure that you maintain those benefits over time. If you interrupt light therapy during the winter months or stop too soon in the spring when you think you're improving, your symptoms could return.

Source: Mayo Clinic (mayoclinic.org)



THE UWL COUNSELING AND TESTING CENTER STAFF ARE AVAILABLE TO HELP THOSE STUDENTS WHO ARE DEALING WITH DEPRESSION AND OTHER LIFE ISSUES. CALL (608) 785-8073 TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT TO TALK WITH A COUNSELOR.