

LIGHT THERAPY

A Proven Treatment for “Winter Blues”



Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.) is a pattern of mood changes, occurring at the same time each year, usually during the winter months.

S.A.D. is commonly known as “winter depression” or “winter blues.” It is a type of depression that usually begins in the late fall to early winter months and ends in spring. It is thought to be caused by the body’s reaction to lack of natural light and occurs more frequently in northern latitudes where the days are shorter (decreased light). Natural light is important because it assists with the body’s natural production of serotonin, a key neurotransmitter that helps regulate mood and melatonin a hormone that helps regulate sleep. Light therapy, psychotherapy, and caring for one’s wellness can be helpful in finding relief from S.A.D.

Symptoms of S.A.D.

- Increased sadness and worry
- Increased irritability
- Increased appetite (including craving sugar and carbohydrates)
- Increased sleep, lower quality of rest
- Loss of motivation
- Loss of energy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Social and interpersonal strain
- Increased weight
- Menstrual difficulties

S.A.D. can be diagnosed by physicians, nurse practitioners and mental health providers based on criteria developed by the American Psychiatric Association. Diagnosis is available on campus at Health & Wellness and Psychological & Counseling Services. Diagnosis is not required to use light therapy at Health & Wellness.

Finding Relief

Light therapy or exposure to full spectrum light is an effective treatment. Light therapy lamps are made of a set of fluorescent bulbs or tubes that are covered with a plastic screen that helps block out potentially harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays. Typical therapy is at 10,000 lux. To put that in perspective, the light in a living space is less than 100 lux, while a bright sunny day may register 100,000 lux.

Duration and Timing: Symptoms of SAD may be relieved by sitting in front of a light therapy lamp first thing in the morning, on a daily basis, for 20-60 minutes, usually from the early fall until spring. The most effective combination of intensity, duration and timing varies from person to person. Your medical or mental health provider can assist you in making appropriate adjustments, based on your individual needs.

Positioning the Lamp: Sit in front of the lamp (about 24 inches is optimal) with your eyes open. Do not look right into the light source.

Effectiveness: Most studies show that about 75% of individuals who experience S.A.D. experience improvement when using light therapy, within 3 to 4 weeks. If you don't feel improvement within a few weeks, antidepressant or psychotherapy may help.



Use your time in front of the lamp to do something relaxing and that doesn't involve technology.

Find Additional Relief

- Take daily walks outside
- Get a good night's sleep, 7+ hours/night, 7 days/week
- Vitamin D supplements
- Increase aerobic exercise, particularly under bright lights
- Recognize and cope with stress
- Eat a variety of nourishing foods and stay hydrated
- Avoid exposure to bright light in the late evening
- Psychotherapy and possibly medication
- For more information about S.A.D. and light therapy call Health & Wellness at (603) 862-3823

Possible Side Effects of light therapy are uncommon and generally mild. Light therapy users sometimes experience irritability, eyestrain, headaches, skin irritation (some medication can cause light sensitivity), dry eyes or insomnia. Reducing the length of daily treatment or sitting further away from the light usually eliminates such effects. There is no research that shows exposure to light therapy can harm the retina or cause or accelerate eye disease.