

SAD – LIGHT THERAPY

Indoor sunshine

Because it isn't always possible to hop on a plane to a sunnier land, phototherapy, or light therapy, is the leading treatment for winter depression. It has a high success rate – around 85 per cent of people find it helpful. SAD expert Professor Chris Thompson of the Royal South Hants Hospital, Southampton, UK, has found that people are three times more likely to get better if they receive less. Colour blind (and blind) people respond just as well. Light therapy may also avoid the need for drugs and it has minimal side-effects. It does involve some initial expense and it can be slightly time-consuming. However, the expense is fairly low while modern light treatments are becoming more sophisticated and it may only be necessary to have two sessions of 20 to 30 minutes a day. The benefits of being free of depression far outweigh these minor disadvantages for most people.

It is possible to buy and use light therapy devices yourself and they are much more readily available now than even a few years ago. It is recommended that you consult your doctor before using one, though you may find that some GPs do not know that much about light therapy. Light treatment is considered to be relatively safe, but you may benefit more with proper guidance, although many people can and do use equipment by themselves.

What is probably more important is how severe the depression is. If you experience serious depression, feelings of 'life not being worth living' or you cannot complete tasks that are usually not a problem, then you should consult your doctor as soon as possible. Those with eye problems should also get medical advice before using light treatment.

There is a long history of the use of 'indoor sunshine'. By the 1890s, European sanatoria were prescribing incandescent electric 'light baths' to treat many physical and psychological conditions. The subject of growing research interest since the early 1980s, light therapy is now widely used, in spite of some scepticism from the medical establishment about a syndrome very few have ever seen as only an estimated 10 per cent of people with SAD have ever been hospitalised.

Today, in the coffee bars of Finland, land of the midnight sun, you can order a coffee and a 'shot' of light – a special bright light at the able to lift your mood. London's Young Vic Theatre introduced its own light café, with large bright light panels at the tables. In Sweden, every building must have nuclear fall-out shelters, so all new buildings, including churches, have cellars with several feet of concrete and heavy lead-lined doors. However, as the cold war had receded, and therefore the nuclear threat, these Scandinavian cellars have had full-spectrum lights installed. You will commonly find Swedish citizens basking in their cellars under their full-spectrum lights. Switzerland funds research into light therapy.

Germany restricts the use of cool white limited-spectrum fluorescent bulbs in public buildings because of their distorted spectral output. Russia uses light therapy to boost productivity and reduce absenteeism in the workplace. Coalminers, for example, have to spend half an hour a day unclothed in natural light or under full spectrum artificial lighting, which has been shown to prevent and treat black lung disease. Russian researchers have also documented that the body's tolerance to environment pollutants and the effectiveness of immunisation are increased by exposure to full-spectrum light.

Research by Dr George Brainard at the University of Pennsylvania has shown that people without SAD can dramatically improve their handling of stress under extended work conditions of 30-hour shifts when exposed to bright, white, fluorescent light. In both Russia and Germany, at work sites where individuals are engaged in shiftwork activity, the law mandates that full-spectrum lighting be used. Some American companies have noticed that workers are more productive, accurate and less likely to take absence in environments that use this type of lighting.

The benefits of light are not limited to humans. In a zoo in New York state, fertility soared after sunlight-stimulating lights were installed in an effort to stop vandalism. Cougars, geese, sheep, deer, bear, wallaby and the chimpanzee all became pregnant.

Bright light therapy (BLT)

BLT is the most established treatment for SAD and consists of looking at special broad-spectrum bright lights from 30 minutes to 3 hours a day, generally in the early morning hours. It is believed to work by reducing or stopping the production of melatonin, while stimulating the brain to make more serotonin.

Light devices are becoming more powerful and portable and less expensive, resulting in increasingly wider use. This is usually done by means of a lightbox, though dawn stimulators are also becoming popular and seem to be effective.

The light needs to be especially bright – much brighter than an original room light, which many only be around 200 to 700 lux. The intensity of light necessary for the treatment of SAD is from 2,500 to 3,500 to 10,000 lux.

Sally's doctor referred her to a psychiatrist who recommended daily exposure to bright light.

It really worked.

As the lightbox manufacturers said, within two to three days I started noticing changes. I felt lighter and more energetic, and my food cravings diminished. I had so much more energy – on the third morning I looked out of the window, and suddenly thought, 'It's quite a nice day, why haven't I been for a walk for so long?' I found myself doing jobs I'd been putting off, had a lot more interest in making the house nice – I revamped the sitting room, got new curtains and big cushions for the sofa and generally made the place cosy for the winter. Whereas before I had wanted to stay in bed and just run down to the kitchen for endless snacks, now life expanded.

Sally

Jon found the first change he noticed was that colours began to seem brighter.

I use lightboxes regularly in the autumn and winter. Without lightboxes or some other kind of treatment my life would not happen during the winter. I'm doing a very intensive course in the evenings as well as a day job and I simply cannot afford to let the time go by while I curl up in a corner, just wanting to sleep and eat, which was what happened before. At the moment I can't afford to let one day go – every moment is vital if I'm to get the qualification I'm aiming for.

When I started, the actual depression took about ten days to lift, but I felt changes in myself well before that – in fact, physically, I felt different every day and I wasn't quite sure what was going on. Now, at the end of the day in winter, I am tired, but it's a healthy tiredness that comes from doing things all day – not that unnatural tiredness I had before that made everything an effort.

Jon



For Jon, light treatment alone was enough. Sally did not rely on light treatment, but took other action to combat her SAD. At work, she rearranged her office so that her seat was closer to the window. She took daily walks to get the benefit of whatever sunlight there was. Although she still looked forward to the spring, she felt relieved that winter had lost its terrible hold.

Light therapy devices

Light sources are available commercially, though they are not available in the NHS.

The lightbox

The most common devices used for bright light therapy are fluorescent lightboxes that produce a light intensity of 2,500 to 10,000 lux while you sit around 30 to 90 cm (up to 3ft) away. Full-spectrum light is not necessary, as the intensity is the most important factor, but a balanced-spectrum light, minus UV-B emissions, is considered ideal.

Most lightboxes can easily be kept on a table or any other place where you normally spend some part of your day, such as a desk by a computer workstation, a dining room table or an exercise room.

Jon gave his father-in-law a lightbox for Christmas. As he is a writer, he kept it on routinely while working and, though he didn't have SAD, said he enjoyed the effect.

As with all light treatment, it is important not to stare directly into the lights because then there is the possibility of eye damage. Some people may be instructed to look at the lightbox briefly at regular intervals, though, for many, this doesn't seem to be necessary. The light does penetrate the eyes obliquely and even passes through closed eye-lids. Small lightboxes are available for taking to work or when travelling.

Some manufacturers will allow a trial period of two weeks or so, which should be enough to see if you benefit or not.

Light visors

These are worn on the head, much like a baseball cap, and have the obvious advantage of being much more convenient, delivering light from above the eyes and allowing you to carry on with normal activities. They produce white light with no UV and allow for mobility.

The disadvantage of these devices is that they are battery powered, which means the batteries need to be replaced from time to time and they seem to be less powerful and successful than lightboxes. However, some people find that using a visor for just 20 to 40 minutes a morning is enough. Others use a combination of visors and boxes to suit their routine.



When to use it

Light therapy is most helpful used daily in winter, starting in early autumn or even in August for some SAD sufferers. Some work has shown that starting treatment early in the year may help eliminate symptoms altogether, giving you a SAD-free winter. Conversely, the later light therapy is started, the more time may be needed to see results. Light therapy often starts working within one to three days. If you do not feel any better after two weeks, consult your doctor or other healthcare provided for further help.

Most people stop using light therapy in the spring as brighter natural light returns. However, you may find you continue to benefit from using the lightbox in spring and summer if there has been a run of rainy or cloudy weather.

Studies show that light therapy is most effective when used in the morning. Most people find that a session between 6 and 8 a.m., with perhaps another session in the afternoon between 3 and 7 p.m., works although this extra session can cause insomnia. Some find light therapy before bed helpful, but, again, this is likely to cause insomnia in most people.

The more powerful the lightbox, the shorter the session that will be needed. Generally, 20 to 30 minutes with a lightbox producing 10,000 lux (or one hour a day at 5,000 lux) is the average 'dose' that produces positive improvements.

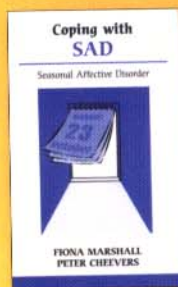
As a rough guideline, whether you are a morning or an evening person may affect when it is best for you to use light treatment.

- *For night owls (or those with DSPS – delayed sleep phase syndrome – to use its medical name). If you have trouble waking up in the morning and often feel sluggish for hours after awakening, even if you have slept longer than usual, you may benefit from an early morning session between 6 and 8 a.m.*
- *For morning people ('larks' or those with ASPS – advanced sleep phase syndrome). If you are at your most alert in the morning, possibly becoming tired around lunchtime, and often going to bed early from choice, you may benefit from a 30-minute session at 10,000 lux between 3 and 7 p.m. Short, periodic sessions throughout the afternoon at high intensity or longer exposure at lower intensity may also be considered. You may not benefit from a second session in the morning.*

It may take some experimenting to find exactly what time of day suits you best, but generally, it is recommended that you take your light medicine at the same time every day.

Once you start feeling better, you may be able to cut down on treatment time or even miss it out some days. Most people seem to be able to miss a couple of days without ill effects, but, by the third day without light therapy, symptoms may return.

This extract was taken from 'Coping with SAD' by Fiona Marshall and Peter Cheevers, by kind permission of Sheldon Press.



The Wonder of Light Therapy

As one of the pioneers of light therapy, SAD Lightbox Company offer a wide range of light therapy products.

For further information visit www.sad.uk.com or telephone 0845 095 6477