

Information on Seasonal Affective Disorder

When the season moves into winter, the days grow shorter, and the skies turn gray, do you find that your mood darkens as well? If so, you're not alone. Approximately 10% of Americans develop the blues during the winter months, and this rate increases to 20-30% in more Northern latitudes such as Oregon. For many people, those "blues" can develop into something more serious, with perhaps as many as 5-9% of people in Portland developing what's called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

What is Seasonal Affective Disorder?

SAD is a form of depression caused by the decrease in natural light during the fall and winter months. It usually subsides by the spring or summer. Symptoms of SAD include increased need for sleep, daytime fatigue, irritability, decreased concentration and ability to think clearly, decreased sex drive, and increased appetite, particularly for sweets and starchy carbohydrates.

How can I learn more about SAD?

You can find out more information about SAD online at our Portland Depression Treatment program website: <http://www.portlanddepressiontreatment.com/seasonal-affective-disorder/>. In addition, the Center for Environmental Therapeutics has a number of resources on their website: <http://www.cet.org/en/index.html>. This includes an online assessment under the "Self-Assessment" tab. (NOTE: this self-assessment is not a substitute for a professional clinical interview.) If you're looking for a book devoted to SAD, we recommend *Winter Blues: Everything You Need to Know to Beat Seasonal Affective Disorder*, by Norman Rosenthal, MD, who first described SAD in a study published in 1984.

What can I do about SAD?

We all can't move to the Southwest during the winter months, but there are things we can do to lessen the impact of SAD. There are a number of changes you can make in routine and diet that can help to offset the symptoms of SAD. The most effective treatment that we know is not a form of psychotherapy at all, but rather, involves increasing your exposure to light in specific ways that seem to mimic the effects of long summer days..It is known as light therapy (see below).

What's light therapy?

Light therapy involves daily doses of artificial light created by devices specifically made to treat SAD. Light therapy devices can be purchased without a doctor's prescription. Most people buy them over the Internet. They are sometimes available at Costco, but unfortunately [Costco also sells some devices that are poorly made and aren't likely to work](#). So, be careful about what devices you buy. Costs range from \$120 to \$300. Be sure to buy one made to target SAD made by a reputable company. In addition to the standard white light boxes, manufacturers are beginning to make blue light devices. Although there is some promising research supporting the use of blue light boxes, for now, broad spectrum white light boxes are probably the better choice because there is larger evidence base for their use. They are also just as cheap or even cheaper than the blue light devices that have been tested.

How do I use a light therapy device?

Most people have a good response by sitting in front of a light box for 20 to 90 minutes a day. One session in the early morning, ideally before the sun comes up, is enough for many people, although some people find they need to also sit in front of the box again in the afternoon or early evening. All you need to do is sit in front of the light at the proper distance and engage in regular activities such as eating breakfast, working, talking on the phone, or reading. You don't need to stare into the light. Most people begin to notice improvements within a week of regular use.

Steps to implement light therapy:

- 1) Obtain a reliable light box (see below for recommendations)
- 2) Set up the box in a convenient location at home or work
- 3) Sit in front of the box for enough time and the right distance for your device (usually 20-90 minutes/day)
- 4) Try to sit in front of the box in the early morning (usually 6-7am or so)
- 5) Monitor if your current plan is working. If not, consider adding an afternoon/evening session and/or increasing the time
- 6) Sit at the proper distance and so that at least some of the light comes into your eyes from above
- 7) Repeat each day through the season of risk

Another option is **dawn simulation**. Dawn simulators work like a soundless alarm clock. Programmed to begin 30 minutes to an hour before you wake up, dawn simulators time lights to gradually come on before you wake up, mimicking a sunrise. The added benefit of a dawn simulator is that the treatment is over when you wake up and begin your day. While dawn simulators have been shown to be helpful, the evidence for their effectiveness is not as strong as it is for light boxes and therefore it works for fewer people. Many people use both a dawn simulator to make it easier to get up in the morning and a light box.

Is light therapy safe?

For the most part, light therapy appears to be safe. Side effects, if present, tend to be minimal and may include headaches, eye strain, and mild nausea—and even these tend disappear after a few days of use. Although well researched, light therapy is still relatively new, and people with eye problems are usually not included in studies, so problems cannot be completely ruled out. However, if you have any history of eye problems beyond the need for ordinary corrective lenses, consult your doctor before starting light therapy.

Where can I learn more about light therapy?

My favorite page that gives lots of detailed info about light therapy is:

- <http://www.psycheducation.org/depression/LightTherapy.htm>

An educational video that I made about SAD:

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrCoef7r2JU&list=PL4AC9B0B7FA4B2CF7>

The Mayo Clinic has a page about how use light therapy:

- <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/light-therapy/MY00195>

Phillips has a nice video of how to use a standard white light therapy device, on this page:

- http://www.usa.philips.com/c/light-therapy/11625/cat/#/cp_tab3

Recommended light therapy devices

Below are some devices that I've tested and should work if used properly:

****White light therapy** -- this is the kind of device that is used in research and has the best support for being effective. If you can afford it, *it's the one that I would recommend*. Prices have really dropped a lot lately, so it's becoming more affordable.

- [Uplift Technologies DL930 Day-Light 10,000 Lux SAD Lamp](#)

If you can't afford the one above -- this *smaller white light therapy device* emits enough light, but only if it's six inches from your eyes. You'll have to be very careful to position it above your eyes and make sure it's close enough (about six inches away). This makes it very difficult to use in a practical fashion so I'd highly recommend spending the extra money for the one above.

- [Sphere Gadget Technologies SP9882](#)

Blue light therapy -- has some research support, but not as much data. It's more expensive to buy and may not be quite as effective.

- [Phillips Golite](#)

Dawn simulators -- very easy to use for those who have a hard time getting out of bed. However, they are probably not as effective for everyone. This can be a good place to start, but if it doesn't work, you'd want to move onto a regular light therapy device.

- <http://windhovermfg.com/>

This page includes information about using a dawn simulator:

- <http://www.psycheducation.org/depression/DawnSimulators.htm>

Other Treatments for SAD

While light therapy is the most proven treatment for SAD, there is also evidence that cognitive behavioral therapy (like that delivered at the [Depression Treatment Program](#) at Portland Psychotherapy) and antidepressant medications can be helpful. If light therapy is not for you or doesn't work, you may want to consider one of these other options.

NOTE: This information page is educational in nature. If you're experiencing severe depression or having suicidal thoughts, we urge you to seek professional services.