

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? 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 as we move into spring and summer. Symptoms of SAD include increased need for sleep, daytime fatigue, irritability, decreased concentration and ability to think clearly, decreased sex drive, and increase appetite, particularly for sweets and starchy carbohydrates.

How can I learn more about SAD?

You can find out more information about SAD on our Portland Mood Disorders Clinic website: <http://portlanddepressiontreatment.com/index.html>. 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. At the Portland Mood Disorders Clinic (part of Portland Psychotherapy), we'd be happy to set up an initial consultation with you to discuss what you can do to make the winter blues seem more manageable. There are a number of changes we 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 over-the-counter, without a doctor's prescription. These can be found in drug stores, hardware stores, or over the Internet. Costs range from \$200 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 boxes. 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.

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 (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 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 should probably be used along with 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. So, 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?

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

Where to buy light therapy devices

Below are some websites where you can buy light therapy devices:

Philips Energy (has probably the best selection of research supported devices):

- *White light therapy* -- the most well-researched and probably the most effective.
 - http://www.usa.philips.com/c/light-therapy/hf3318_60/prd/
- *Blue light therapy* -- has some research support, but not as much data. It's cheaper to buy, but may not be quite as effective.
 - http://www.usa.philips.com/c/light-therapy/plus-rechargeable-hf3332_60/prd/
- *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.

- http://www.usa.philips.com/c/light-therapy/11625/cat/#/cp_tab2

Light Therapy: <http://store.lighttherapyproducts.com/>

This page includes information about using a dawn simulator:

<http://www.lighttherapyproducts.com/sunrisecreator.aspx>

BIO-LIGHT: <http://www.bio-light.com/lightsproducts.html>

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 Portland Mood Disorders Clinic) 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.