

What is seasonal Affective Disorder?

Do you find that you get depressed, or your depression gets noticeably worse, every winter but you feel brighter when the days become sunnier? If you have experienced this pattern for 3 winters or more, then you may have seasonal affective disorder (SAD). SAD is often worse around February time as a result of all the short days of winter. Some people report difficulty getting up on dark mornings, craving for carbohydrates and feeling low and sluggish when the days are short, as well as symptoms of depression and anxiety. It is thought that some people are sensitive to lack of light leading to reduced serotonin, which is important for mood, and increased melatonin which makes the body sleepy.

Are there treatments available?

- You may find a light box helpful - this is a source of bright light which you have on for a certain time each day and which can make up for the lack of light in the winter. Studies have found that about 6 to 8 out of 10 people with SAD have improved symptoms after using a lightbox for a few weeks. (About the same as the findings for antidepressants).
- Light therapy can be used alongside antidepressants and talking therapies but you should discuss it with your doctor. Check with your doctor first if you have eye problems which are affected by light.
- Light therapy consists of sitting two to three feet away from a specially designed light box, usually on a table, allowing the light to shine directly through the eyes.
- The user can carry out normal activity such as reading, working, eating, crafts etc while sitting in front of the box. It is not necessary to stare at the light although it has been proved safe. Tinted glasses should not be worn.
- Treatment is usually effective within three or four days and the effect continues provided it is used every day.
- This is a long term treatment. The advice is to start in the autumn and continue using the lightbox every day right through the winter.
- How long the treatment takes depends on the lightbox you get – the more powerful ones take only 20 minutes but you can buy a less expensive one and have it on for longer.
- Most people use the lightbox in the morning, possibly with a top up in the afternoon provided that it doesn't prevent you from feeling sleepy at night. It is not recommended to use a lightbox within 4 hours of going to bed
- If you buy a lightbox check that it is at least 2500lux. Ordinary lightbulbs only give out about 500 lux.

- Lightboxes do not give out any more UV light than an ordinary lightbulb so you do not need to wear sunscreen.
- Manufacturers estimates are that the lightboxes cost from 0.1 to 1p an hour to run and that the bulbs last for at least 500 hours.
- Dawn simulators gradually wake you up with a white light in the morning. Some people find them helpful but they are not the same as lightboxes and there isn't evidence that they can treat SAD. You can also replace lightbulbs with daylight spectrum bulbs but this will not give as much light exposure as a lightbox.
- Lightboxes can be bought online eg from sad.co.uk or Boots. They cost £100-200 and are VAT free. Many companies offer try before you buy or hire schemes. Eg National Light Hire Company, 0870 143 6702 0800 107 7951, www.sad-lighthire.co.uk

Self-help

There are a number of self help steps you can take to reduce the effects of SAD. Wherever possible, try to:

- find time each day to get outside especially in Winter
- sit near windows when you are inside
- take regular, moderate exercise
- eat a well-balanced diet cutting down on sugary foods
- decorate your home in light colours
- leave any major projects until summer and plan ahead for winter
- not put yourself under stress and learn relaxation techniques

Useful Websites

The seasonal affective disorder association produce an Information Pack which contains full details of SAD treatments, where to obtain light therapy equipment and how to use it. www.sada.org.uk

Mind produces a very good leaflet on SAD which you can read online at

http://www.mind.org.uk/help/diagnoses_and_conditions/seasonal_affective_disorder

