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Frequently Asked Questions About Seasonal Affective Disorder

What is Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD?

SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) is a clinically diagnosed disorder typically characterized by a fall or winter onset with several of the following symptoms:

- feeling sad or depressed
- lethargy
- difficulty concentrating
- carbohydrate or sugar cravings (often accompanied by weight gain)
- difficulty waking in the morning
- sleep disturbance
- social withdrawal
- reduced productivity
- irritability

These symptoms are a result of important brain chemicals, namely serotonin and melatonin, becoming imbalanced due to the decreased availability of light in the fall and winter seasons. The impact of SAD is felt in one's general emotional state, relationships, occupation and / or overall sense of life satisfaction. When untreated, the symptoms typically worsen as winter progresses.

What are the Winter Blues?

The winter blues are a less severe form of seasonal affective disorder. However, just because there may not be as many symptoms does not mean treatment should not be sought. In fact, the winter blues are, like seasonal affective disorder, quite treatable.

What is Winter Worsening?

Winter worsening is a pre-existing condition, such as depression or PMS that gets worse during the fall and winter months.

What Causes SAD?

Medical research reveals seasonal affective disorder, the winter blues and winter worsening are caused by the decreased exposure to sunlight. During the fall and winter months, less light passes through the eyes which inhibits the release of an important brain chemical, serotonin. When serotonin is not released in sufficient quantity, depressive symptoms begin to occur. Melatonin, another important brain chemical, also is affected by insufficient light. The brain releases too much of this chemical at the wrong time, also contributing to depressive symptoms.

What is the treatment for SAD and its related disorders?

The standard in treating these disorders is light therapy. In fact, it is the primary treatment recommended by the American Medical Association and the American Psychiatric Association, backed by extensive medical research through the prestigious National Institute of Mental Health. The advantages of light therapy are that it is simple to administer, requires no ingestion of chemical substances and has a minimal of side effects.

How does the treatment of SAD with bright light work?

Treatment of seasonal affective disorder, the winter blues and winter worsening includes a variety of options. An evaluation by a qualified professional is an important place to begin. While self diagnosis may be accurate, other conditions and issues may need to be examined. The standard medical treatment for seasonal affective disorder, the winter blues and winter worsening often involves the use of phototherapy--exposure to a specific form and intensity of light. Additional components of successful treatment may include the use of medication and counseling. Over the last 18 years, medical research collected from around the world tells us that light therapy, in sufficient intensity and time, is an important component in the successful treatment of SAD. The optimal intervention is exposure to 5,000 to 10,000 lux (a measure of intensity) for a set amount of time at a distance of 1 - 3 feet from the light. Many people only require 20-30 minutes per day with that intensity. Older lights, those putting out 2,500 lux of light typically, require one to two hours of exposure.

Light therapy signals the brain to release sufficient amounts of serotonin and curtail the daytime release of melatonin, a major source of depressive symptoms. For the vast amount of SAD, winter blues, and winter worsening sufferers, benefits will begin to occur within a few days.

Timing is another important factor in light therapy. Typically, the best time to start a light therapy session is when one awakes in the morning (or afternoon for night shift workers). Another treatment strategy may include a supplemental afternoon session. A few will find light therapy prior to bedtime helpful, but this will cause insomnia for most people.

How can I determine if a light will work for me?

Consulting with your medical or mental health professional is the best place to start if you are interested in using a light for medical or mental health purposes. There also are a number of evaluative tests which may be obtained through your medical or mental health professional.

Will my light be safe?

The overwhelming response is "Yes!" Generally, the only people who need to be concerned are those with serious pre-existing eye conditions. To be safe, always consult with your physician prior to using light therapy for medical or mental health purposes. Also, like all electrical devices, you should not use your light around water (such as hot tubs, bath tubs, etc.) as there is the risk of death by electrocution.

What about side effects?

The nice thing about light therapy is that the side effects are experienced by only a small percentage of people, and typically are temporary. They can include a jittery feeling, excitability, mild nausea and mild burning of the eyes. These typically are eliminated after a few days and / or by temporarily adjusting the distance one sits from their light.

What about replacing my regular light bulbs and overhead lights with full spectrum lights? Won't they do the same thing?

For the majority of people afflicted with seasonal affective disorder and its related disorders, the answer is no. Medical research indicates the therapeutic effect comes from the high intensity of light. This high intensity, generally ten to twenty times brighter than regular room light, stimulates the brain to produce the chemical changes responsible for the antidepressant effect of light. One should be careful about the light being too bright. Never look directly at the sun; it can damage your eyes. Also, most incandescents are bright enough to be harmful. Finally, full spectrum light is not necessary for the therapeutic effect but we use them because they provide a pleasant, crisp light, is easy on the eyes and offers good color rendering. As can be seen in the diagram, these specialized lights, made by Excella, are the next best thing to sunlight. In summary, replacing the light bulbs in your house with full spectrum lighting will help make your house look great, but typically is not useful for producing true therapeutic effect.

Does medical insurance cover the expense of purchasing a light?

Some insurance carriers will reimburse. Talk with your doctor or contact your insurance company for details.