

Light Therapy

Light therapy is a way to treat seasonal affective disorder (SAD) and some sleep disorders using artificial light. Light therapy uses a light therapy box that gives off light that mimics outdoor light. It is a good idea to talk to your provider before starting light therapy.

When to Use Light Therapy

- Your doctor recommends it for Seasonal Affective Disorder – a type of depression that occurs usually in the Fall or Winter, other types of depression, jet lag, sleep disorders, adjusting to a nighttime work schedule, dementia
- You want to try using a lower dose of an antidepressant medication
- You want to avoid antidepressants during pregnancy or breast-feeding
- You want to try a treatment that is safe with few side effects

Possible Side Effects

- Eyestrain
- Headache
- Nausea
- Irritability or agitation
- Mania, euphoria, hyperactivity, decreased sleep or agitation as with bipolar disorder

Side effects may go away on their own within a few days of starting light therapy. Talk to your provider for advice if side effects are a problem.

Possible Contraindications

- Sensitivity to light (ie: skin conditions like systemic lupus erythematosus, medications that increase sensitivity to light like antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, or St. John's Wort)
- You have an eye condition that makes your eyes vulnerable to light damage
- Bipolar disorder

What to Expect

Most people with seasonal affective disorder begin treatment with light therapy in the early Fall, when it typically becomes cloudy, and continue until Spring, when outdoor light is enough to sustain a good mood and higher levels of energy.

Light therapy won't cure seasonal affective disorder, non-seasonal depression or other conditions, but it may ease symptoms, increase your energy levels, and improve your mood.

Light therapy can start to improve symptoms within just a few days; however, it can also take a few weeks to see results.



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How to Use the Light Therapy Box

During light therapy sessions, you sit or work near a light box. To be effective, light from the light box must enter your eyes indirectly. You can't get the same effect merely by exposing your skin to the light. While your eyes must be open, don't look directly at the light box, because the bright light can damage your eyes. Be sure to follow your doctor's recommendations and the manufacturer's directions.

Light therapy requires time and consistency. You can set your light box on a table or desk in your home or office. Consider using the light therapy box while you read, use a computer, write, watch TV, talk on the phone or eat. Stick to your therapy schedule and don't overdo it.

Three key elements for effectiveness – Light therapy is most effective when you have the proper combination of light intensity, duration and timing.

- **Intensity.** The intensity of the light box is recorded in lux, which is a measure of the amount of light you receive. For SAD, the typical recommendation is to use a 10,000-lux light box at a distance of about 16 to 24 inches (41 to 61 centimeters) from your face.
- **Duration.** With a 10,000-lux light box, light therapy typically involves daily sessions of about 20 to 30 minutes. But a lower-intensity light box, such as 2,500 lux, may require longer sessions. Check the manufacturer's guidelines and follow your provider's instructions. You may be recommended to start with shorter sessions and gradually increase the time.

Getting the most out of light therapy – Light therapy isn't effective for everyone. But you can take steps to get the most out of your light therapy and help make it a success.

- **Get the right light box.** Do some research and talk to your doctor before buying a light therapy box. That way you can be sure your light box is safe, the proper brightness, the right kind of light, and that its style and features make it convenient to use.
- **Be consistent.** Stick to a daily routine of light therapy sessions to help ensure that you maintain improvements over time. If you simply can't do light therapy every day, take a day or two off, but monitor your mood and other symptoms — you may have to find a way to fit in light therapy every day.
- **Track the timing.** If you interrupt light therapy during the winter months or stop too soon in the spring when you're improving, your symptoms could return. Keep track of when you start light box therapy in the fall and when you stop in the spring so you know when to start and end your light therapy the following year.
- **Include other treatment.** If your symptoms don't improve enough with light therapy, you may need additional treatment. Talk to your doctor about other treatment options, such as antidepressants or psychotherapy.



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