

## Seasonal Affective Disorder & Light Therapy

**Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)** is a type of depression that happens at the same time each year. Most people experience symptoms in late fall or early winter, and symptoms usually improve in the spring. Mild symptoms are sometimes called the “winter blues,” but some people experience more serious symptoms that need treatment.

### What causes SAD?

The exact cause isn't known, but SAD is linked to reduced sunlight in the fall and winter. Less sunlight can affect brain chemicals that control mood and sleep. These include **serotonin**, which helps lift your mood, and **melatonin**, which affects your sleep and mood patterns. With less daylight, your body may produce too much or too little of these chemicals, causing symptoms.

### Common symptoms

- Fatigue or low energy
- Heavy feeling in arms or legs
- Irritability
- Increased appetite or cravings, especially for carbohydrates
- Low mood most of the day
- Sleeping more than usual
- Trouble getting along with others
- Suicidal thoughts, in severe cases (seek help immediately)
- Weight gain

## **Ways to improve symptoms**

- Spend time outdoors daily, even on cloudy days
- Exercise regularly
- Keep a regular sleep schedule
- Keep your home/workspace bright
- Maintain healthy eating habits
- Sit near windows when indoors
- Practice relaxation or stress management
- Seek counseling or therapy
- Take antidepressant medication if prescribed
- Use light therapy (a sunlight-simulating device)

## **What is light therapy?**

Light therapy uses a special light box that mimics natural sunlight. A 10,000-lux light box is recommended. This light is much stronger than standard bulbs and does not harm the eyes when used correctly. Research shows it helps two out of three people with SAD.

## **How to use light therapy**

- Use it in the morning, soon after waking.
- Sit with the light shining toward your face (do not stare into the light).
- You can read, eat, use your phone, or work while using it.
- Start with 10-15 minutes per day and increase to 30-45 minutes per day over time.
- Begin using it in early fall and continue until spring.

## **How fast does it work?**

- Many people feel better within two to four days.
- For others, it may take several weeks.
- If symptoms don't improve after four to six weeks, talk with your health care provider.

## Possible side effects

Side effects are uncommon, but may include:

- Headache
- Irritability
- Feeling tired
- Eye strain
- Difficulty sleeping (if used too late in the day)

## Choosing a light box

Light boxes usually cost around \$40–\$200. Some insurance plans or Flexible Spending Accounts (FSA) may cover part of the cost. When buying a light box, look for:

- 10,000 lux brightness
- A UV-filtering screen
- White light (not colored)
- Light that is angled downward (not directly into eyes)

**For more mental health educational resources, visit [depressioncenter.org/toolkit](https://depressioncenter.org/toolkit).**

---

This document provides general educational information developed by the Eisenberg Family Depression Center. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Please consult your health care provider if you have questions about your health or treatment options.