

Feeling Sad, Listless, or Tired? Light Therapy May Help!

Provided by KUMC Counseling & Educational Support Services

What Is This?

Light therapy may ease symptoms of seasonal affective disorder, increase your energy levels, and help you feel better about yourself and life. Light therapy can start to improve symptoms within just a few days. In some cases, though, it can take two or more weeks and it is not a cure for seasonal affective disorder, depression or other conditions.

How Does it Work?

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.

Can I Really Improve My Symptoms?

Light therapy isn't effective for everyone but taking these steps will help you get the most out of your light therapy.

- *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.
- *Time it right.* If you have seasonal affective disorder and interrupt light therapy during the winter months or stop too soon in the spring when you think you're improving, your symptoms could return.
- *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 psychotherapy or antidepressants.

What Makes it Effective?

Light therapy is most effective when you have the proper combination of duration, timing and light intensity:

- *Duration.* When you first start light therapy, try it for shorter blocks of time, such as 15 minutes. Over time, you might gradually work up to longer periods. Eventually, light therapy typically involves daily sessions of about 30 minutes.
- *Timing.* For most people, light therapy is most effective when it's done early in the morning, after you first wake up.
- *Intensity.* The intensity of the light box is recorded in lux, which is a measure of the amount of light you receive at a specific distance from a light source. Light therapy boxes produce 10,000 lux. The intensity of your light box affects how far you sit from it and the length of time you need to use it. A 10,000-lux light box usually requires 30-minute sessions.

What if I'm Busy?

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

What are the Benefits of Light Therapy?

- It is a treatment that is safe and has few side effects.
- It's a proven seasonal affective disorder treatment.
- If you have another condition, such as nonseasonal depression or insomnia, light therapy could be helpful.
- Light therapy can increase the effectiveness of antidepressant medication or mental health counseling (psychotherapy).

Are There Any Risks?

Light therapy is generally safe. If side effects occur, they're usually mild and short lasting. They may include:

- Eyestrain
- Headache
- Nausea
- Irritability or agitation
- Mania, euphoria, hyperactivity or agitation associated with bipolar disorder

When side effects do occur, they may go away on their own within a few days of starting light therapy. You also may be able to manage side effects by reducing treatment time, moving farther from your light box, taking breaks during long sessions or changing the time of day you use light therapy. Students and residents may consult with the psychological providers at KUMC Counseling & Educational Support Services by scheduling an appointment (913-588-6580).

Who Should Not Use This?

Light therapy is contraindicated if:

- You have a condition that makes your skin especially sensitive to light, such as systemic lupus erythematosus
- You take medications that increase your sensitivity to sunlight, such as certain antibiotics, anti-inflammatories or the herbal supplement St. John's Wort
- You have an eye condition that makes your eyes vulnerable to light damage
- You have a history of skin cancer

Caution for bipolar disorder

Light therapy may trigger mania in some people with bipolar disorder. If you have any concerns about how light therapy may be affecting your mood or thoughts, students and residents may contact KUMC Counseling & Educational Support Services at 913-588-6580.

Getting Help For Depression

On our campus, students and residents have access to free and confidential treatment for depression. You may complete a free depression screening at <http://screening.mentalhealthscreening.org/#/KUMC>. If you, or someone you know is struggling with depression, contact Counseling and Educational Support at 913-588-6580.