

Winter Depression (aka Seasonal Affective Disorder): Information for Patients and Families



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Purpose of this Handout

This handout has information about seasonal affective disorder (aka winter depression) and ways to get over the winter blues.

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Where to Get this Handout

This handout is available from <http://www.drcheng.ca> in the Mental Health Information section. Any comments and suggestions are welcome and will help ensure this handout is helpful.

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What is seasonal depression?

Seasonal depression, commonly known in North America as winter depression is a type of depression that occurs in the fall/winter months. It usually begins in late fall or early winter and goes away by summer, and is linked to the seasonal lack of sunlight.

How common is seasonal depression?

Studies estimate that 25% people get 'winter blues' or the 'winter blahs', but surveys show that about 1-5% of people actually develop more serious symptoms of seasonal depression.



What are the symptoms of seasonal depression?

Common symptoms of winter depression include troubles in the fall and winter months with the following:

- Mood problems, with sadness, boredom/apathy
- Sleep problems, with a tendency to need more naps and more sleep
- Fatigue and low energy
- Usually increased appetite, with cravings for carbohydrates and sweets, which may thus result in weight gain
- A tendency to want to avoid social situations, as well as being more sensitive to rejection
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities
- With more severe symptoms, one may also note feelings or hopelessness or helplessness

Symptoms of seasonal depression typically come back over and over again the same time each year.

Sometimes though, it can be hard to figure out whether or not the mood is lower because of the season (and lack of sunlight), or whether it is lower due to other factors (e.g. dealing with the stress of school or work in the fall).



How is seasonal depression treated?

Light Therapy

Because seasonal depression usually occurs in the fall/winter, when there is less sunlight, the treatment of choice is to provide that missing light via light therapy.

Light therapy involves using a special lamp (with UV filter) that can deliver a sufficiently bright light to treat depression (i.e. 5,000 to 10,000 lux of light; lux is a measure of bright light is). Each day, the person sits near the light box for 30-60 minutes a day, usually in the mornings. One doesn't stare directly into the light, but rather benefits from sitting near it and doing other activities near the light such as reading, working on the computer, eating breakfast, etc.

The starting dosage of light therapy is usually 10,000 lux for 30-minutes a day.

This is done during the fall/winter months, until enough daylight is available, typically in the springtime.

Significant improvement can often be seen within days.

Side Effects -- When used properly, light therapy seems to have very few side effects. Side effects include eye strain, headache, fatigue, irritability and trouble sleeping at night (if light therapy is used too late in the day).

Caution -- Caution is required with light therapy in people with manic depressive disorders, skin that is sensitive to light, or medical conditions that make their eyes vulnerable to light damage.

Tanning Beds -- Tanning beds are not helpful for treating seasonal depression, as they provide a different type of light (i.e. UV light) that is more for creating tans than in helping depression.

Other Types of Depression Strategies

Seasonal depression may also benefit from the other usual treatments for non-seasonal depression which include:

- Strategies for the body – such as ensuring proper sleep, diet, exercise and healthy lifestyle. In addition, antidepressant medications can be helpful as well. It is interesting that individuals with seasonal depression typically get cravings for carbohydrates, which implies that those individuals may be 'self-medicating' for a shortage of serotonin in their brains. Such individuals may also respond better to antidepressant medications that provide serotonin, so-called specific serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). Common SSRIs include Prozac (Fluoxetine), Zoloft (Sertraline), Celexa (Citalopram), Luvox (Fluvoxamine), Ciprallex



Picture of a woman sitting in front of one type of light box (Brightspark™, made in the UK).



(Escitalopram). One study by Lam and colleagues showed that light therapy and fluoxetine (Prozac) are equally effective treatment options (Lam et al., 2006).

- Strategies for the mind and spirit – identifying and dealing with work, school and relationship stress; ensuring one has a good social support network of people to talk to and have fun with. Professional counseling and talk therapy can also be very helpful.

Some Suggestions for Coping with Seasonal Depression

- Get started early with light therapy or other strategies, early in the fall, before the usual onset of symptoms later in the fall/winter.
- Educate yourself, family and close friends about seasonal depression to get their understanding and support.
- Take advantage of natural day light in the winter as much as possible
 - Exercise daily outdoors by going for walks during daylight hours, or other activities, and get someone to go with you. (One study showed that an hour's walk in winter sunlight was as effective as two and a half hours under bright artificial light.)
 - Arrange family outings and social occasions for day times and early evening in winter
- Work strategies
 - If possible, ensure that you have an office with a window, or take frequent breaks to get exposure to outdoors light
 - If possible, ensure that you have full spectrum lights
- Stay on a regular sleep/wake schedule on both weekdays and weekends
 - Avoid staying up late, as this disrupts your sleep schedule and biological clock
- If you are able, arrange a winter vacation in a sunny climate!



Manufacturers of Light Boxes (Canadian)



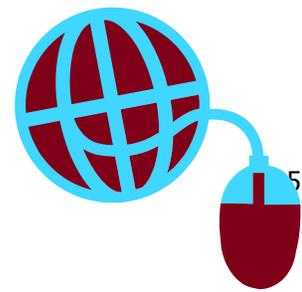
There are an increasing multitude of manufacturers of light boxes, sold at many pharmacies and retail stores. Here are some Canadian manufacturers:

- Northern Light Technologies, 8971 Henri-Bourassa W., Montreal, Canada, H4S 1P7, Tel: 514-335-1763, Toll free: 1-800-263-0066, Fax: 514-335-7764
Website: <http://www.northernlighttechnologies.com>
- Uplift Technologies Inc., 1-800-387-0896, 125-11 Morris Drive, Dartmouth, NS, B3B 1M2, Canada, Tel: (902) 422-0804, Fax: (902) 422-0798
Website: <http://www.day-lights.com>

Other reliable manufacturers are:

- Apollo Light Systems, <http://www.apollolight.com>
- The Sunbox Company, <http://www.sunboxco.com>

Internet Links



- Canadian Consensus Guidelines for the Treatment of Seasonal Affective Disorder
<http://www-fhs.mcmaster.ca/direct/sad.html>
- Dr. Lam's SAD page at the University of British Columbia
http://www.psychiatry.ubc.ca/mood/md_sad.html
- Society for Light Treatment and Biological Rhythms (SLTBR)
<http://www.websciences.org/sltbr>

Readings about Seasonal Affective Disorder

- Canadian Consensus Guidelines for the Treatment of Seasonal Affective Disorder, edited by Raymond Lam and Anthony Levitt, Clinical & Academic Publishing, 1999
- Don't be SAD: Your guide to conquering Seasonal Affective Disorder, Peter Celeste, Script Publishing, 1994
- Winter Blues, Norman Rosenthal, Guilford Press, 1998

References

- Lam RW, Levitt AJ, Levitan RD, et al. The CAN-SAD Study: A randomized controlled trial of the effectiveness of light therapy and fluoxetine in patients with winter seasonal affective disorder. *Am J Psychiatry* 2006;163:805-812.