

# Seasonal Affective Disorder

Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, or the Winter Blues, is officially recognised by Doctors and Psychiatrists as a medical condition that is thought to affect 2 million people in the UK and Ireland and over 12 Million people across Northern Europe.

Historically we only ever worked outdoors; two hundred years ago 75% of the population worked outdoors now less than 10% of the population work in natural outdoor light. Whilst this is fine in the Summer months when there are longer daylight hours, in the Winter months, people tend to go to work in the dark and go home in the dark and don't get to enough natural daylight.

This modern way of living has dramatically altered nature's cues. A modern day no longer starts at the break of dawn and ends at sunset. Workdays are getting longer and many people face shift work schedules. Additionally, the advent of electric lighting allows social gatherings and personal activities to extend well into the night. These factors have diminished the body's natural ability to regulate the body clock and this work/life change has resulted in a dramatic increase in light deficiency symptoms.

In the UK and Ireland we are more susceptible to SAD as we are situated in the higher latitudes of the northern hemisphere. As a result, we experience large changes in light levels between the summer and winter. We also experience periods of dark, gloomy weather which can reduce the amount of light we receive and therefore have a profound effect on our body clocks.

A combination of a change in seasonal light, our hectic lifestyles and the periods of darker days and poorer weather, can result in dramatic effects on our circadian rhythms. As a direct consequence of these environmental and lifestyle factors more people than ever before are suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder.

The human body uses light cues, such as those provided by the sun, to time certain functions. Properly timed rhythms regulate mood, sleep, wake, appetite, digestion and energy. These daily internal cycles called 'Circadian Rhythms' sometimes fall out of time, meaning an unregulated body clock, resulting in the symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

Now with our hectic lifestyles, we often miss critical signals from the sun, and our body clocks suffer. Without proper morning light, our body clocks don't produce the hormones we need to wake up and feel active. When we miss daytime light, we slump and become less productive. At night, we usually stay up hours after dark, causing sleep and mood problems. In fact, how we sleep, how active we are, and how we feel are all regulated by our body clock.

When your body clock doesn't get the right light signals, you can feel tired, moody, and sluggish. But when your body clock does get the right type of light, your body produces active, energetic hormones and suppresses the negative, withdrawal ones. These hormones will help reset your sleep, mood, and energy cycles, so you sleep better at night and feel great during the day.

There are a diverse range of symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder; many are associated with a feeling of general depression - which is why it is sometimes known as the 'Winter blues'. Below is a list of possible symptoms.

An example of SAD Symptoms include:

- Lethargy, lacking in energy, unable to carry out a normal routine
- Sleep problems, finding it hard to stay awake during the day, but having disturbed nights
- Loss of libido, not interested in physical contact
- Anxiety, inability to cope
- Social problems, irritability, not wanting to see people
- Depression, feelings of gloom and despondency for no apparent reason
- Craving for carbohydrates and sweet foods, leading to weight gain

It is always important to consult your doctor if you believe you have SAD as it may be another condition.

Previous treatments for depression and especially Seasonal Affective Disorder involved the use of prescribed medication. In recent years, however, research across the world has shown that SAD sufferers responded, often quite dramatically, to treatment with light. SAD.org.uk does not recommend drugs for the treatment of SAD as drugs only help the symptoms and not the causes of SAD.

Lack of light causes an increase in the production of Melatonin (the hormone that makes us sleepy at night), and a reduction of Serotonin, the lack of which causes depression. The exposure to bright light therapy reverses the process, with the additional benefit of being drug free.

By providing summertime levels of light during the winter you can successfully alleviate the symptoms of SAD with the result that former sufferers can lead a normal, happier life and beat the Winter Blues. In fact almost everyone can benefit from increased energy levels when using a lightbox.

Starting your light therapy treatment is as easy as flicking a switch and you should start to feel a benefit within 7-10 days of using a medically certified SAD Light.

SAD Light Therapy products are entirely safe to use for for the majority of people and if you are generally healthy you should have no problem using one. However, in some instances we advise you to consult your doctor/medical practitioner before you start using a lightbox (You should always consult your doctor for the diagnosis of Seasonal Affective Disorder). If you:

- have an eye problem or if you are particularly sensitive to light.
- are (or have been) taking antidepressants or medication against epilepsy.

Before purchasing your SAD Light it is important to shop around and ask plenty of questions to find the right Light Therapy device for you.

The best product for you should always be a combination of treatment time, treatment distance, price, and portability; so before contacting anybody ask yourself these questions:

- How long do I have to undertake a light therapy treatment? (treatment times usually vary between 20 - 90 minutes)
- Will I take a treatment at the same place every day or will I be taking a treatment at home and at work and therefore need something light weight and portable?
- Where will I be positioning my lightbox and therefore at what distance away will the lightbox be from my eyes? (different light therapy devices are effective at different distances)
- How much can I afford to pay? (certified medically proven Light boxes vary in price from £110 to more than £300)

Below are list of questions you may wish to ask companies that sell SAD Light boxes to help you decide which one is best for you:

- Describe your situation and ask them which product they recommend for your situation
- Has this product been proven to be effective for the treatment of SAD?
- How much does the product that you've recommended cost?
- Are there additional costs for delivery of the product you've recommended?
- Are there any additional costs for things like bulb replacement?
- What are the dimensions and weight of the product you've recommended?
- What is the recommended treatment distance for the treatment time for the product?
- What is the recommended treatment time for the product you've recommended?
- Does the product that you've recommended come with at least a two year warranty?
- Does your company have a returns policy that allows me to return your product for refund if it doesn't work for me?

In the last few years LED light boxes for the treatment of Seasonal Affective Disorder have been proven to be just as effective as traditional tube bulb SAD Light devices.

LED light therapy devices have been proven to be effective but please only buy from a manufacturer that has proven research. Some 'copycat' products do not produce the correct levels of light and whilst not dangerous they may not treat Seasonal Affective Disorder effectively. Please always look at the manufacturers website and research thoroughly before making a purchase to ensure the product is a genuine medical treatment device.

Although the light emitted by the sun appears to be white it is actually made up of the full spectrum of colours. This becomes apparent when sunlight shines through rain and it is split into the full spectrum of colours creating a rainbow.

The theory behind conventional Full Spectrum (White Light) light boxes is that they effectively replicate sunshine. As a result they give the user a positive response when they are lacking sunshine.

Historically only Full spectrum light boxes were used to treat light deficiency disorders. However, advancements in research and technology have shown that a particular bandwidth of blue light is also effective in treating Seasonal Affective Disorder.

There are many studies in to the effectiveness of White Light and Blue light therapy and it is a clinically proven technology for the treatment of SAD. SAD.org.uk recommends the use of traditional White Light therapy devices as well as the newer Blue Light Therapy devices.

Dawn Simulators treat some of the symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder, but they cannot be classed as a medically proven SAD Light.

- SAD Light = Medically proven Light Treatment Device designed to treat the root cause of SAD (lack of sunlight). This will be classed by the retailer as VAT exempt (for personal use) it is a proven medical device.
- Dawn Simulator = A waking device that helps the user wake gently from there sleep (some Dawn Simulators also include a Sunset facility to aid sleep)

Dawn Simulators are excellent products in their own right, but they must not be confused with SAD Lights as they only treat part of the problem. Dawn Simulators will promote good sleep and help you to wake naturally in the mornings. However, please note that difficulty waking is just one of the symptoms of SAD and a normal Dawn Simulator will not cure SAD. Many sufferers of Seasonal Affective Disorder purchase both a SAD Light and a Dawn Simulator - as a gentle waking using a Dawn Simulator, followed by a medical SAD Light treatment about half an hour after you wake has been found to be the most effective way to treat SAD.

SAD Lights that treat the root cause of Seasonal Affective Disorder with a full Light Therapy Treatment and as a result they have to be registered with the Medical Devices Agency as required by European Union legislation. (CE 0120, designed and built to conform to EN60601-1/-2, EC93/42, EC89/336, EN60598 and EN46002).