

Frequently Asked Questions

Health Issues

What is SAD and which lamps can be used to treat it?

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is one of many types of depression. Since a treatment of SAD involves light and is frequently discussed in popular press, questions are asked about this treatment. Although information of a general nature that is available in the published literature can be mentioned, it is essential to avoid suggesting or recommending any form of treatment. A person seeking to use phototherapy for SAD should be advised to consult a physician.

General Background

1. SAD is not the “winter blues” often associated with dreary and dismal winter days. It is considered a more serious form of depression. Only a trained, knowledgeable individual can make a proper diagnosis.
2. It is important for a physician to direct SAD phototherapy. This is in his province, and there are many factors that must be considered for effective treatment. Also, there may be concomitant medical conditions that must be considered.
3. The light used in this phototherapy is not of itself harmful. Essentially, it is “white” light. However, inappropriate or incorrect use of phototherapy could prevent an individual from getting proper treatment for his condition.
4. As a general description, SAD phototherapy involves an individual being exposed to a panel of fluorescent lamps that produces a higher level of light than normally found for indoor lighting but less than typical out-of-door daylight levels. Specific light level, timing, and duration for exposure is part of the physician’s treatment plan.
5. Although the original research on SAD phototherapy utilized Vita-Lite fluorescent lamps, subsequent studies have shown that the spectral distribution of the light is not critical. For example, cool white fluorescent lamps produced the same results as Vita-Lite lamps as shown by Lewy, et al. (Science, 235:352, 1987).
6. Because of the seasonal occurrence of SAD, it was suggested originally that the phototherapy functioned by extending the length of the photobiologically sensed day during the shorter days of winter. There have been suggestions that a circadian phase shifting also is involved.
7. As with many medical treatments, the effectiveness of SAD phototherapy will vary among individual patients.