

Weathering winter blues... how light affects mood

As temperatures drop and daylight dwindles, it's natural to fall victim to winter blues. But Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a depression linked specifically to shorter days, resulting in a need for more sleep, feelings of fatigue, significant weight gain, withdrawal, disinterest in sex. What distinguishes this form of depression: its symptoms abate with spring.

While other body rhythms are influenced by seasonal changes, the light/dark cycle has the greatest effect. The Rx? A dose of simulated natural light each morning. Until recently, some SAD patients (SAD is estimated to affect as many as thirty-five million people,

in varying degrees of severity, in the United States) were faced with sitting in front of a therapeutic light for up to six hours. Is the cure worse than the disease? "Until now," explains Philip C. Hughes, Ph.D., president of Medic-Light, Inc., "the technology was most applicable to severe cases, where the need for therapy outweighed the time factor."

Medic-Light's new, smaller, more powerful model reduces the length of exposure to an average of thirty minutes. The portable unit (which sells for about four hundred dollars) can be set up on a desk or tabletop with lights positioned overhead, allowing one to read, work, or watch television.

According to Michael Terman, Ph.D., research scientist, New York



State Psychiatric Institute, at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, improvement is almost immediate. "The typical patient responds within three to four days."

A lack of light also disrupts the pineal gland's secretion of the hormone melatonin. Normally, its production increases throughout the night, beginning around 9 P.M. In SAD patients, says Alfred J. Lewy, M.D., Ph.D., of The Oregon Health Sciences University, that onset is delayed. However, it remains unclear whether this is a symptom of the disorder or its cause.

Beyond moods, how does winter affect health? We're more prone to colds and flus, indirectly because of the weather. When it's cold outside, we spend more time inside, the perfect breeding ground for germs. According to Elliot C. Dick, Ph.D., professor of

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preventive medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison Medical School, the only effective solution is to avoid close contact with other people.

Colder weather also means that the heart works harder to maintain body temperature, a stressor that can increase the risk of heart attack. In addition, lung problems are exacerbated, causing airways to constrict and breathing to become more difficult.

Paul Paris, M.D., medical director, University of Pittsburgh's Center of Emergency Medicine, recommends a common-sense approach to winter weather. "People don't acclimate themselves; they don't adjust activities or clothing to compensate." The fact is, temperature extremes—from the hot and humid nineties to the frigid teens—require people to adapt routines, and exercise caution.

—BARBARA KLEIN

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