- Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) / Depression

TECHNOLOGY



SAD lamps work best when incorporated into a regular morning routine

WHAT ARE SAD LAMPS?

These bright light boxes are designed to tackle winter blues

WORDS AILSA HARVEY

Did you know?

1 in 20 people in the UK are diagnosed with SAD

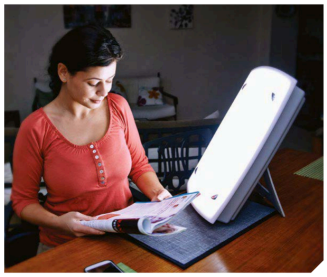
SAD lamps are light boxes that shine light into the eyes of the user to replace what's missing in the winter months, when the Sun rises later in the day and sets earlier. For some people, the missing daylight received through the eyes can result in a condition called seasonal affective disorder (SAD). This is a mood disorder that causes depressive symptoms in a recurrent seasonal pattern.

The change in mental health can last four to five months of the year during winter.

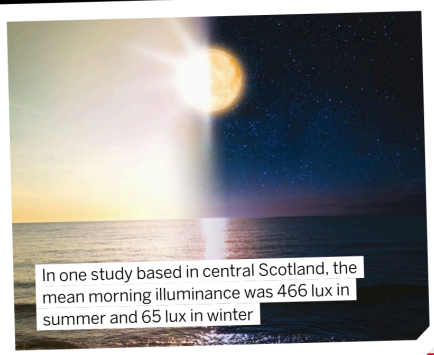
SAD lamps emit bright light that can induce a chemical reaction in the brain the same way summer daylight can. This light can reduce the production of melatonin – the hormone that makes you feel sleepy – and increases the hormone serotonin to boost your mood. The human body relies on light as its cue for instigating energy levels, stimulating periods of wakefulness and sleep. Although a SAD lamp mimics the light levels produced by the Sun, it doesn't emit any ultraviolet light. This means it can't help in producing more vitamin D in the body. Low vitamin D is another cause of SAD, and these levels may need to be restored separately.

LIGHTING UP YOUR LIFE

The best time to use a SAD lamp is first thing in the morning; avoid turning it on in the evening as it can hinder sleep. It's recommended to position yourself about one metre away from the lamp, if using a 10,000 lux lamp, so that the light reaches your eyes and stimulates your circadian rhythm, replacing the effect of the rising Sun during dark winter mornings. You may think more light means more results, but don't leave it on for longer than recommended, as this can disrupt your circadian rhythm and be more detrimental than beneficial. Some people can experience headaches, nausea or eyestrain from light therapy. If this happens, you should stop using the lamp and consult a doctor.



When using a SAD lamp, have your eyes open without looking directly at the lamp



In one study based in central Scotland, the mean morning illuminance was 466 lux in summer and 65 lux in winter

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LUX LEVELS

A lux level is the unit of measurement for how much light falls on a surface. This light intensity level can also be called illuminance. One lux is equal to the illumination covering a surface of one metre squared from a single candle placed one metre away. Light is also measured in a unit called lumen, and one lumen equals the amount of light one candle produces in all directions. The difference with lux is that it measures the light that reaches a surface. This measurement is useful for determining how much light from a lamp reaches a person's skin. A SAD lamp generally needs a lux level of 10,000 for optimal effect. This is the same light your body is exposed to in ambient daylight. In direct sunlight, lux levels increase to 32,000 to 100,000 lux. A 10,000-lux SAD lamp should be used for 30 minutes a day for it to have an effect.