

## **Why so sad? Find relief with the flick of a switch**

### **Light boxes can beat the winter blues of SAD: seasonal affective disorder**

Source:

USA Weekend

November 6-8, 1998

Author: Ann Japenga

Every year around this time, Keith Hansen began craving dark beer and pasta, a sure sign of his annual descent into a lethargic state known as seasonal affective disorder, or SAD. That all changed the day Hansen, 38, walked into the showroom of a light-device manufacturer.

"There I was, surrounded by beautiful, comforting and uplifting light," says Hansen, an economist in Washington, D.C. "I said, 'Yeah, I've got to have one of these.'"

More and more of the 10 million Americans afflicted by SAD -- or its milder sister, the winter blues -- have come to the same conclusion. Since light therapy was discovered nearly 20 years ago, it has come to be regarded as first-line management for SAD, says Normal Rosenthal, M.D., a pioneering light therapy researcher at the National Institute of Mental Health. His pointers:

**What SAD is.** Seasonal affective disorder is a form of depression marked by its seasonality as well as sluggishness and a craving for sweets and starches. SAD responds especially well to light treatment - three or four out of every five sufferers benefit.

**Best treatment.** The best bet for most people is a light box. In choosing among the styles, consider how far you'll sit from the box, as well a room size.

**How to use a light box.** Routine use is 20-90 minutes in front of it; morning is best. Time and brightness (lux) vary according to how sensitive the user is to light.

**Ask your insurer.** Good news: Some will cover the cost of the devices - \$200 to \$550 for a typical light box.

**Buy the right light.** Light therapy devices of not regulated. Stick with name brands that have been around for a while.

**Light in your eyes.** Recent news reports based on a Cornell University study suggested light therapy can be successfully administered to the back of the knee or other areas of the body. The jury is still out. For now, assume you need to see the light to benefit.

**Greet the dawn.** Hansen supplements his light boxes with a dawn simulator; a rheostat device that attaches to his ordinary bedside lamp and slowly grows brighter in the morning.

**Under your hat.** There's not yet good scientific evidence of the effectiveness of the light visor - a kind of baseball cap with lights embedded in the brim. Yet, the anecdotal and clinical feedback has been encouraging. The visor may be a good choice if you don't have a desk job and more around a lot.

**Beware of a buzz.** One advantage of light therapy over antidepressants is the low incidence of side effects. But consult your doctor if you feel unduly jazzed-up or suffer headaches or eyestrain.