



Awakenings Mental Health

Bright Light Therapy (BLT) Information Sheet

What Is Bright Light Therapy and Its Effectiveness?

Bright light therapy (BLT), often delivered via a lightbox, is widely regarded as a first-line, non-drug intervention for Season Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD is a type of depression that occurs in the fall and winter—when there is less natural sunlight. A meta-analysis of randomized clinical trials found that BLT significantly reduces depressive symptoms in SAD patients compared to placebo treatments, with a moderate effect.

How Bright Light Work - Timing and Dose Matter

BLT suppresses melatonin and boosts serotonin, thereby resetting the body's circadian rhythm and improving mood regulation. For maximum effectiveness, it's typically administered in the early morning, which aligns with the body's natural rhythms and helps regulate the internal clock.

Dosage Guidelines - Lux Levels and Duration

The standard therapeutic dose uses 10,000 lux of broad-spectrum light for 30–60 minutes each morning, with the individual positioned approximately 30–60 cm (12–24 inches) from the light source, eyes open but not looking directly at it. The light should be placed at roughly a 30-degree angle, slightly above eye level and angled downward toward the face. Alternative options include 2,500 lux blue light or 350 lux green (cyan) light, which may also be effective but require different exposure durations.

Starting Light Before Symptoms Begin

The Carlat “Pocket Protocol” recommends beginning BLT about two weeks before SAD symptoms typically emerge (e.g., before late fall/winter onset), and then gradually tapering off the light sessions over about two weeks in the spring to maintain rhythm and reduce relapse risk.

Light Box Selection - Features to Look For

Choose a device that delivers the proper therapeutic dose (around 10,000 lux) and includes effective UV filtering (99%+). A screen should diffuse light to minimize glare, and the size should be sufficient (roughly 200 square inches) to accommodate slight movement without losing therapeutic range.

Portable Alternatives and Visual Considerations

While some newer light therapy devices—such as wearable visors or glasses that use blue-enriched white light—have shown potential benefit in small studies, the strongest evidence still supports traditional light boxes. Light boxes deliver a consistent, well-studied dose and remain the recommended first-line option. If using any device, avoid looking directly into the light to protect your eyes.

Beyond Seasonal Use - Broader Applications

Although BLT is most commonly used for SAD, accumulating research supports its use in nonseasonal major depression as either a stand-alone or adjunctive treatment—improving response and remission rates in several trials. Additionally, benefits have been observed in bipolar depression and other mood disorders.

Safety, Side Effects, and Clinical Oversight

BLT is generally well tolerated, with few side effects—typically mild issues like eye strain or headache. For individuals with eye conditions, bipolar disorder, or other vulnerabilities, consultation with a healthcare provider is important before use. Long-term maintenance protocols still require more research for sustaining benefits and minimizing relapse.

Important: This information is for educational purposes only and does not replace professional medical advice. Always consult with your healthcare provider for personalized guidance regarding bright light therapy.