

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Light Therapy Protocol

A practical, evidence-based protocol for using bright light therapy to manage seasonal affective disorder (SAD), based on clinical trial parameters from NIMH-originated research and subsequent replications.

1. Equipment

- Use a lamp rated at 10,000 lux at operating distance (the standard tested in trials).
- Confirm the lamp is UV-filtered. Ordinary bright bulbs are not a substitute.
- Position 12-16 inches from your face, at eye level or slightly above, angled downward.

2. Timing

- Use within 1 hour of waking. Morning light corrects the phase delay linked to SAD.
- Avoid evening sessions — they can worsen phase delay in some people.
- Be consistent: daily use through the symptomatic season, not just on low-mood days.

3. Session Length

- Start with 20 minutes at 10,000 lux.
- If no improvement after 1 week, extend to 30 minutes.
- Keep eyes open, light entering peripheral vision — do not stare directly at the panel.
- Read, eat breakfast, or work during the session; it does not require idle sitting.

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4. What to Expect

- Response is typically visible within 1-2 weeks — faster than most antidepressants.
- Track energy, mood, and sleep timing daily for the first 2 weeks (use the log below).
- If no change after 2-3 weeks of consistent use, consult a clinician before continuing.

5. Precautions

- Bipolar disorder: light therapy carries a documented risk of triggering mania or hypomania. Use only under clinical supervision.
- Retinal conditions or photosensitizing medications: check with an ophthalmologist or prescriber before starting.
- Mild eye strain, headache, or nausea in the first days are common — reduce session length, then build back up gradually.

6. Two-Week Tracking Log

Day	Session start	Duration	Mood 1-5	Energy 1-5	Notes
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					