

# IT THERE BE LIGHT

**W**ITH the year's shortest day approaching on December 21, not even the prospect of Christmas can stop many people hitting the doldrums. "It's likely that about one in 10 people with recurrent depression have a seasonal pattern," says Dr Anthony Cleare from the Institute of Psychiatry.

Although many people suffer from winter mood changes their symptoms aren't severe enough to be classed as clinical depression. Nevertheless, they cause increasing distress and can lead to difficulties at work or in relationships.

The causes of seasonal affective disorder (SAD) are unclear, though there are theories that the lack of light decreases levels of serotonin – the happy hormone – in our brains.

Changes in the body's biological clock, which alters during the seasons, may play a role. High levels of the hormone melatonin, mostly produced in hours of darkness to help us sleep, is also thought there are to be linked to depression.

"There's no one thing that's clearly identified," says Dr Cleare. "The symptoms may be caused by a mixture of biological and psychological changes."

"We're more likely to suffer if others in your family do. As with other forms of depression, women are more likely to be affected."

**10 TIPS TO LIGHTEN UP**  
Exposure to intense artificial light suppresses the secretion of melatonin and may enhance the effectiveness of serotonin. Best of all, it has no side-effects.

However, ensuring you get between one and four hours of exposure a day is a serious time commitment and equipment can be expensive.

For intense light use the Litebook, £199, above. It's small (15cm high) but powerful with a 5,000 lux intensity.

Mild SAD sufferers will like the contemporary round lamp design of the Rondo light, £124.95, which emits a warm, sunshine glow. Both are available from [www.allergymatters.com](http://www.allergymatters.com) or call 0800 052 8228.

**SLEEP SOUNDLY**  
Dr David Whiting, MD, WPCPsych, believes a good night's sleep is one of the best ways to combat depression. The

**More than 2.9million people in the UK are diagnosed with depression at any one time. Women are treated for it twice as often as men and it seems to hit harder at this time of year. CHARLOTTE STACEY throws some light on winter blues**

recommends a warm, comfortable bed, insulation and curtains to restrict noise and light and a hot milk drink (not tea or coffee), before hitting the pillow; plus "the satisfied exhalation of sex".

**CREATE A SPLASH**  
Colour can brighten your mood as well as your home if it's employed wisely. "Choose colours you like best," says Claudia Booth, director of Acra Soma (01307 533561 [www.acra-soma.net](http://www.acra-soma.net)), where they use

colour to analyse emotional wellbeing. "The more clear and clean the colour the better for your mood. Bright pink is preferable to dusty pink, for example. "Make sure your chosen colour's visible as you go to sleep – on a lampshade or bedcover," she says. "I wake up in a better mood with certain colours around me."

**BUT AN HONISER**  
Researchers at Columbia University found 50 per cent of patients treated with high-density negative ions had significant relief from depression, almost identical to the number who improved with drugs. What's more, ionisers have no side-effects.

Elmex Ioniser, £295 (plus p+p), [www.elmex.co.uk](http://www.elmex.co.uk) or call 0800 074 5660, has been certified by the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration as a medical device and produces biologically active negative ions small enough to be inhaled.

**ST JOHN'S WORT**  
This herb, right, is highly effective at treating mild to moderate depression.

Medical herbalist Dr Ann Walker, who's also a senior lecturer in Herb Studies at Reading University, says: "It's a wonderful,

vitality-raising, mood-enhancing detox herb for both sexes."

But Dr Richard Dowdall, from Brighton University and consultant in adult psychiatry, advises caution. "St John's Wort works in the same way as prescription anti-depressants and has side-effects," he says. "It can reduce the effectiveness of oral contraception, for example. Consult your doctor before you try it."

**RESET THE SUNSET**  
Our sleeping and waking cycle (circadian rhythm) is governed by light and dark whereas melatonin triggers the pineal gland to produce melatonin.

Bodyclocks work like sunshine alarms. You set them to gradually brighten or dim according to when you want to wake up or sleep as they create a false sunrise and sunset and regulate melatonin levels. From £85, call 0843 528 8292 or visit [www.lumie.com](http://www.lumie.com).

**TRY TRYPTOPHAN**  
"This is an amino acid that makes serotonin," says Patrick Holford, nutritionist and author of *Optimum Nutrition for the Mind*, (£2.99 (Piatka)).

What drives tryptophan into the brain is insulin which you get from eating carbohydrates. "People with low serotonin often crave carbohydrates. If their mood improves when they eat then it's a good indicator they're low in tryptophan," he says.

Patrick advises eating chicken, which is high in tryptophan, as well as salmon, mackerel or tuna and flax seeds rich in omega-3 fatty acids, to boost serotonin production and help the brain make more.

Alternatively, take 5HTP supplement, preferably with five-carbon serotonin levels will rise and you'll have lower carb craving," he says.

**EXERCISE**  
"Some studies suggest regular aerobic exercise may help low-grade seasonal mood changes," says



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Dr Cleare. Research by mental health charity Mind found two-thirds of people said exercise helped relieve depression. It's essential to increase levels of serotonin.

**CHANGE YOUR BULBS**  
Patrick suggests swapping your light bulbs to full spectrum ones which have a white colour more akin to daylight.

"They cost more but last about 10 times longer," he says. Try a hardware store or mail order from GB Bulbs (01283 521176 or visit [www.gbbulbs.co.uk](http://www.gbbulbs.co.uk)).

**SCENE UP**  
Scene is linked directly to the brain through our limbic system which also deals with emotions, reason, libido and sleep cycles. Aromatherapy is based on the impact smells have on moods and

recognises certain aromas can calm or provoke wellbeing.

Theresa Hinchey, national training manager at Ucedor, says her favourite oils are bergamot (stimulating and refreshing), mandarin orange (invigorating) and geranium (balancing and calming). Try a few drops in a burner or mix into a carrier oil for a massage.

© The Seasonal Affective Disorder Association ([www.sada.org.uk](http://www.sada.org.uk)) offers support for sufferers. For an information pack send a 15 potted order or cheque payable to SADA to The SAD Association, PO Box 989, Stagswood, RM4 2JZ. Winter Blues Seasonal Affective Disorder - What It Is & How To Overcome It by Norman Plomfield (Chalfont Press), £12.

