

Light Therapy, Alone and with Anti-Depressants, Improves Severe Depression

Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), commonly known as severe depression, is the second-leading worldwide cause of disability, impacting 14% of people in their lives. Lots of treatment paths exist but often have low remission rates and considerable side effects. Light therapy, involving regular doses of high intensity light has been well established as a safe, effective treatment for seasonal depression. However, its value for treating MDD had, until recently, been inadequately tested and inconsistently observed. Now, recent data from the most rigorous study of its kind has found that light therapy is useful in treating non-seasonal severe depression, by itself and especially when combined with anti-depressants.

This study's findings were particularly powerful because it was the first doubled-blind experiment to have placebo pills and a placebo/sham negative ion treatment. This allowed the placebo/sham combo to be a baseline for comparing light therapy alone (10,000 lux fluorescents for 30 minutes per day), anti-depressants alone (20 mg a day of fluoxetine hydrochloride), and the combination of light and pharmaceuticals together.

Results from over 130 participants showed strong and consistent benefits from treating MDD with light therapy, based on multiple indicators. Both alone and in conjunction with anti-depressants, light-treatment reduced depression severity scores much more during the 8 week treatment than either the placebo or anti-depressant alone. Both seeing a "response" (a reduction of 50% in MADRS score) and "remission" (a score of 10 or lower at the end) were more common with both light treatment groups, too. Likewise, psychiatrists' and patients' ratings of depression levels during treatment sessions showed the same pattern.

For all these measures, the combination of light and drug therapy showed the greatest treatment results. Also important to point out is that anti-depressants alone did not outperform the placebo/sham group by ANY measure. Perhaps most notably, the benefits of light therapy were achieved without increasing the overall likelihood of side effects at all.

Editorial: *At least in this case the simple benefit of light is as powerful as medication and does not present the issue of side effects. As a society we reach for pills for cures far too often, ignoring common sense solutions.*

Bibliography

Efficacy of Bright Light Treatment, Fluoxetine, and the Combination in Patients With Nonseasonal Major Depressive Disorder: A Randomized Clinical Trial. *FREE ONLINE FIRST* Raymond W. Lam, MD^{1,2}; Anthony J. Levitt, MBBS^{3,4}; Robert D. Levitan, MD, MSc^{4,5}; Erin E. Michalak, PhD^{1,2}; Rachel Morehouse, MD⁶; Rajamannar Ramasubbu, MD⁷; Lakshmi N. Yatham, MBBS, MBA^{1,2}; Edwin M. Tam, MDCM^{1,2}. *JAMA Psychiatry*. Published online November 18, 2015. doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2015.2235