Light therapy for the treatment of seasonal affective disorder (SAD)

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Clinical question
Will light boxes make my patients less SAD?

Recommendations
There is insufficient evidence to support using light boxes to improve symptoms of seasonal affective disorder. Patients with suspected SAD should be evaluated using the PHQ-9 and treated with antidepressants and/or talk therapy as recommended in the Group Health Depression Guideline.

Why did we choose this topic?
At this grey, dark, wet time of year, many patients experience a sense of gloom! And many will have heard of home light box therapy as a way to improve their mood. Yet, regardless of whether they’ve actually been diagnosed with SAD, these patients are unlikely to benefit from light therapy.

Group Health’s Medical Technology Assessment Committee (MTAC) recently re-reviewed this topic and, as in the 2008 review, the therapy failed MTAC’s criteria. The committee’s December 2015 review of randomized controlled trials comparing light therapy to placebo, antidepressants, or cognitive behavioral therapy failed to show significant benefit from using light therapy to treat SAD. (See the current Light Therapy for SAD Clinical Review Criteria.)

What is SAD?
The term seasonal affective disorder (SAD) was first introduced in 1984 to describe a series of patients with a history of recurrent depressions that occurred in the fall or winter and spontaneously remitted in the following spring or summer (Rosenthal 1984). SAD affects about 5–6% of the U.S. adult population, and its prevalence increases with latitude. Prevalence ranges from 1.4% in Florida to 9.7% in New Hampshire and 9.9% in Alaska. It is reported that patients’ average age at onset is about 27 years, and that women are more likely than men to develop the disorder (Rohan 2013, Sanassi 2014).

What does the evidence say about treating it?
Antidepressant medication is an accepted treatment for depression in general, and three SSRIs have shown favorable results with SAD.

While cognitive behavioral therapy may help reduce the risk of relapse of major depression, only a few small studies evaluated its effectiveness for SAD (Sanassi 2014).
Light boxes are designed to be safe and effective, but are not regulated as devices by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). A number of side effects of light therapy for SAD have been reported, but are generally mild and/or transient. These include headache, nausea, agitation, eye strain, and blurred vision. Evening light therapy may lead to sleep disturbances. Suicidality, menstrual irregularity, and hypomania in bipolar patients have also been reported.

References
