

Bright Light Therapy for Mood Disorders: Choosing & Setting-up a Light Box

Get the right light box

Be careful. Light boxes are not federally regulated. Claims for effectiveness in depression are generally marketing slogans, and anything small enough to fit easily in a bag is likely to be ineffective. A sunny room does not approach the intensity of light needed for bright light therapy.

Here are 2 specific products to look for:

- **Northern Light Technologies Boxelite OS Desk Lamp** – \$205
This light box has been evaluated and is currently recommended by the non-profit Center for Environmental Therapeutics (CET), that also has detailed information on light and dark therapy for both patients and providers on their website (cet.org). Their [link for this light box](#) also includes a sample letter that patients can use to attempt reimbursement from their insurance through Durable Medical Equipment.
- **Carex Daylight Classic Plus** – \$140
This light box is cheaper and meets all the below criteria. It has been previously used in clinical trials of bright light therapy.

General criteria that a bright light therapy box should meet:

- **Intensity & Size** – 10,000 Lux illumination of both eyes at a comfortable distance (at least 12 inches) requires a large screen of at least 200 square inches. Avoid small, portable light boxes. They may advertise 10,000 Lux, but this illuminance is only achieved in a narrow field or at an uncomfortably close distance. If you already have a lamp, you can use a phone app such as Lux Light Meter Pro to test the luminosity at different distances.
- **Light** – White light. Blue or full spectrum lamps are not more efficacious.
- **UV Filter** – For safety, fluorescent lamps should include a polycarbonate filter that prevents ultraviolet rays from reaching the eyes and skin

Read the instructions with the light box and follow them.

Pay particular attention to the distance one sits from the screen, and the height and angle of the light box. Lux is inversely proportional to the square of the distance from the light source, so small changes in how far one sits can render an effective treatment ineffective. Generally, people sit at a table or desk and look down at a computer or book or their breakfast. It is fine to wear glasses if they are not tinted or shaded.



Bright light therapy set-up for 10,000 Lux illumination

Apparatus Details: downward-tilted, smoothly diffusing, ultra-violet absorbing, 32 x 41-cm polycarbonate screen, soft-white fluorescent lamps. *Photo credit from the Center for Environmental Therapeutics, <http://www.cet.org> (Terman, CNS Spectr, 2005)*