

## **DON'T LET THE HOLIDAYS GET YOU DOWN, SEE THE LIGHT**

### *Light therapy can stave off the holiday blues*

NASHVILLE, Tenn. Dec. 2005 – The winter holidays are usually an occasion for joy – people gather and exchange gifts, eat rich food and spread good cheer. But for many Americans, the holidays can mean long weeks of depression and stress. Dr. Vatsal Thakkar, a psychiatrist with the Nashville Academy of Medicine, said that there are some quick and effective ways of dealing with holiday depression.

“While most people find a holiday joyful, others don’t,” he said. “There is a biological reason. Seasonal changes in light and temperature can affect energy, appetite, sleep, and mood. Superimpose the holidays and the associated stress and you can slip into a deeper depression.”

According to Thakkar, our eyes can hold the key to staving off the holiday blues. The optic nerve that carries light to our brain passes by the area that controls the body’s circadian rhythms – the internal clock that affects nearly every part of the functioning. During the winter, our eyes see less daylight and it throws off the body clock. This condition can last for months.

“People who suffer from seasonal depression usually start in October or November and remit in March or April,” he said. “If the depression is isolated to December and January, then it might be more due to the holiday, rather than season of the year.”

Thakkar added that there are wide ranges of treatments for seasonal depression that are very effective.

“Light therapy, for example, is a common treatment. Giving the brain more light in the morning will help set the body clock and restore function. A standard dosage is an hour per day under a 10,000-lux lamp.”

Lux is the unit of measure for light on a surface. One lux is roughly equal to the light from a single wax candle. Light therapy boxes are designed to provide the correct illumination to help with seasonal depression. Thakkar said light therapy could be a quick fix.

“We see studies that show results within the week,” he said. “You have to have the light in front of you, but you don’t have to stare into it. If you read in front of the lamp, your eyes are getting the light.”

Other common treatments include therapy and medication.

“Cognitive behavioral therapy is an effective “mind over matter” solution. It would include behavioral activation such as increasing outdoor activity and exposure to natural

light during the winter,” he said. “In addition, getting a better insight on what’s causing your depression can help you deal with it healthily. There may also be a place for medication in seasonal depression. Antidepressants are safe and well tolerated and people with this condition would only take them during the months they’re affected, not year-round.”

The thing to keep in mind, according to Thakkar, is the duration and severity of the depression.

“All these things are based on severity,” he said. “Some people might exhibit a mild downturn in their mood and energy in the winter and not do anything about it. Others may completely shut down in the winter. They need to seek help. If you notice your mood and energy dip in the winter, be aware of the severity. Experiencing suicidal thoughts, for example, is reason enough to seek a professional evaluation. That should never be part of the normal coping process.”

Founded in 1821, the Nashville Academy of Medicine is dedicated to supporting physicians who provide the highest quality medical care and are pledged to uphold the highest standards of conduct. The 1,900 Academy members represent 70 fields of practice, all local hospital medical staffs, the faculties and administration of Nashville’s two medical schools, local and state health departments and boards, and numerous health and paramedical agencies and organizations. Since its founding, the Academy has produced eight presidents of the American Medical Association and 44 presidents of the Tennessee Medical Association.