

## THE CONVERSATION

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# American Medical Association warns of health and safety problems from 'white' LED streetlights

June 17, 2016 3:48pm EDT



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New LED-based streetlights are whiter than traditional ones and contain more blue light, which can disrupt people's circadian rhythms. meltedplastic/flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

The American Medical Association (AMA) has just adopted an official policy statement about street lighting: cool it and dim it.

The statement, adopted unanimously at the AMA's annual meeting in Chicago on June 14, comes in response to the rise of new LED street lighting sweeping the country. An AMA committee issued guidelines on how communities can choose LED streetlights to "minimize potential harmful human health and environmental effects."

Municipalities are replacing existing streetlights with efficient and long-lasting LEDs to save money on energy and maintenance. Although the streetlights are delivering these benefits, the AMA's stance reflects how important proper design of new technologies is and the close connection between light and human health.

The AMA's statement recommends that outdoor lighting at night, particularly street lighting, should have a color temperature of no



greater than 3000 Kelvin (K). Color temperature (CT) is a measure of the spectral content of light from a source; how much blue, green, yellow and red there is in it. A higher CT rating generally means greater blue content, and the whiter the light appears.

A white LED at CT 4000K or 5000K contains a high level of short-wavelength blue light; this has been the choice for a number of cities that have recently retrofitted their street lighting such as Seattle and New York.

But in the wake of these installations have been complaints about the harshness of these lights. An extreme example is the city of Davis, California, where the residents demanded a complete replacement of these high color temperature LED street lights.

Can communities have more efficient lighting without causing health and safety problems?

## Two problems with LED street lighting

An incandescent bulb has a color temperature of 2400K, which means it contains far less blue and far more yellow and red wavelengths. Before electric light, we burned wood and candles at night; this artificial light has a CT of about 1800K, quite yellow/red and almost no blue. What we have now is very different.

The new “white” LED street lighting which is rapidly being retrofitted in cities throughout the country has two problems, according to the AMA. The first is discomfort and glare. Because LED light is so concentrated and has high blue content, it can cause severe glare, resulting in pupillary constriction in the eyes. Blue light scatters more in the human eye than the longer wavelengths of yellow and red, and sufficient levels can damage the retina. This can cause problems seeing clearly for safe driving or walking at night.

You can sense this easily if you look directly into one of the control lights on your new washing machine or other appliance: it is very difficult to do because it hurts. Street lighting can have this same effect, especially if its blue content is high and there is not appropriate shielding.

The other issue addressed by the AMA statement is the impact on human circadian rhythmicity.

Color temperature reliably predicts spectral content of light – that is, how much of each wavelength is present. It’s designed specifically for light that comes off the tungsten filament of an incandescent bulb.



Light is composed of light of different colors (red, blue and green) and some LED streetlights have a relatively high portion of blue light, which can disrupt people’s circadian rhythms. flakepardigm/flickr, CC BY-SA

However, the CT rating does not reliably measure color from fluorescent and LED lights.

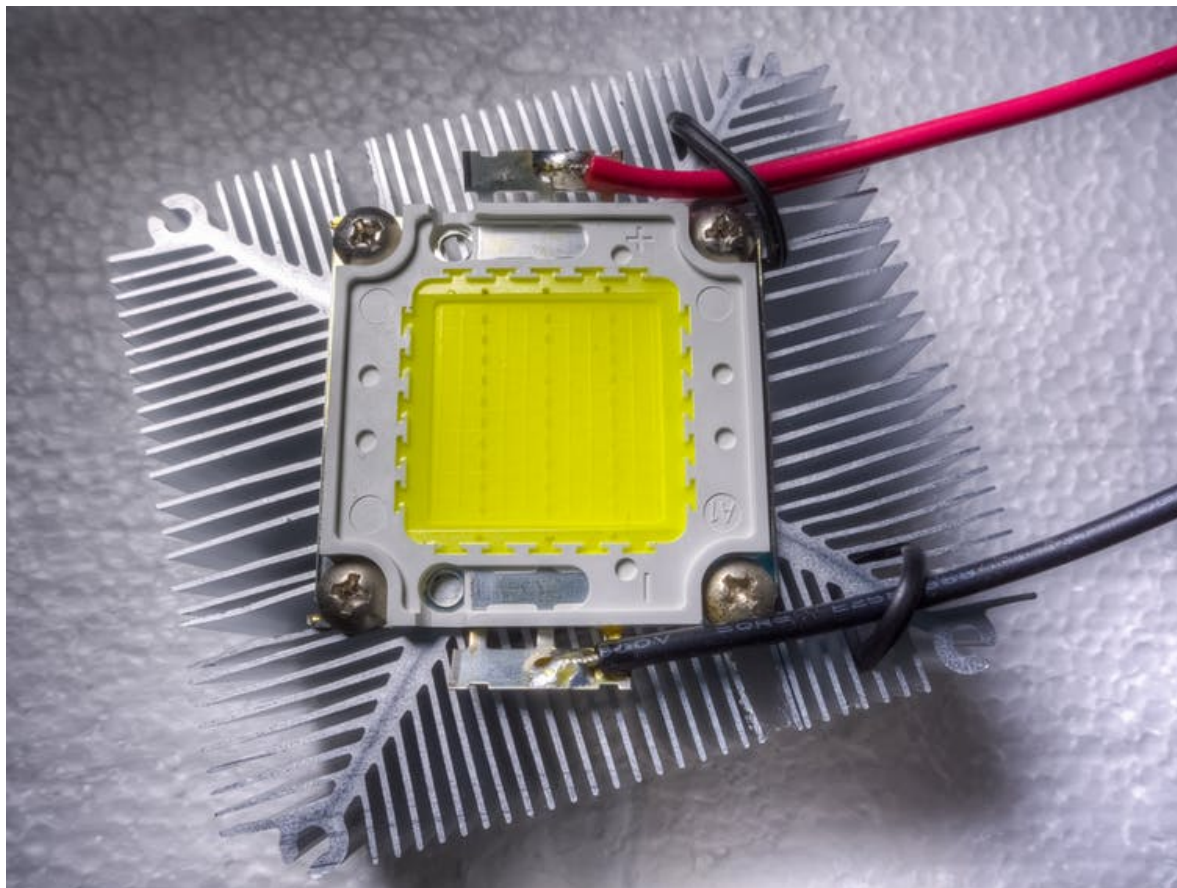
Another system for measuring light color for these sources is called correlated color temperature (CCT). It adjusts the spectral content of the light source to the color sensitivity of human vision. Using this rating, two different 3000K light sources could have fairly large differences in blue light content.

Therefore, the AMA's recommendation for CCT below 3000K is not quite enough to be sure that blue light is minimized. The actual spectral irradiance of the LED – the relative amounts of each of the colors produced – should be considered, as well.

### **The reason lighting matters**

The AMA policy statement is particularly timely because the new World Atlas of Artificial Night Sky Brightness just appeared last week, and street lighting is an important component of light pollution. According to the AMA statement, one of the considerations of lighting the night is its impact on human health.

In previous articles for The Conversation, I have described how lighting affects our normal circadian physiology, how this could lead to some serious health consequences and most recently how lighting the night affects sleep.



LEDs (the yellow device) produce a highly concentrated light, which makes glare a problem for LED streetlights since it can hamper vision at night. razor512/flickr, CC BY

In the case of white LED light, it is estimated to be five times more effective at suppressing melatonin at night than the high pressure sodium lamps (given the same light output) which have been the mainstay of street lighting for decades. Melatonin suppression is a marker of circadian disruption, which includes disrupted sleep.

Bright electric lighting can also adversely affect wildlife by, for example, disturbing migratory patterns of birds and some aquatic animals which nest on shore.

## Street lighting and human health

The AMA has made three recommendations in its new policy statement:

First, the AMA supports a “proper conversion to community based Light Emitting Diode (LED) lighting, which reduces energy consumption and decreases the use of fossil fuels.”

Second, the AMA “encourage[s] minimizing and controlling blue-rich environmental lighting by using the lowest emission of blue light possible to reduce glare.”

Third, the AMA “encourage[s] the use of 3000K or lower lighting for outdoor installations such as roadways. All LED lighting should be properly shielded to minimize glare and detrimental human and environmental effects, and consideration should be given to utilize the ability of LED lighting to be dimmed for off-peak time periods.”

There is almost never a completely satisfactory solution to a complex problem. We must have lighting at night, not only in our homes and businesses, but also outdoors on our streets. The need for energy efficiency is serious, but so too is minimizing human risk from bad lighting, both due to glare and to circadian disruption. LED technology can optimize both when properly designed.



Environmental health   LEDs   Lighting