

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

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Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that occurs in the fall and winter. People with this disorder usually feel fine in the spring and summer. But, winter's short days and lack of light can produce some changes in brain chemistry that cause mood disturbances.

Many people may feel some "winter blues" during the cold months. People who have SAD develop a depression that can interfere with normal, day-to-day activities.

Symptoms

Symptoms of SAD include:

- excessive sleeping without feeling refreshed
- overeating, especially foods high in carbohydrates
- feeling sad, depressed, hopeless and irritable
- being unable to do normal tasks, with a loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- a lot of illnesses because of a low resistance to infection.

Light Therapy

Artificial light can relieve symptoms of SAD in 75 percent of cases within 1 or 2 weeks. Light therapy involves sitting near a specially designed light box that delivers ultraviolet-free light (10,000 lux), for at least 20 minutes a day, usually in the morning. You cannot use a regular light bulb for light therapy.

Talk with your health care provider if light therapy is a good option for you.

Prevention and Treatment

Some people with SAD experience a significant decrease in serotonin, the neurotransmitter responsible for mood, appetite, sleep, memory and energy. Others feel less social, sluggish and "gloomy" in the winter months.

If you know you are sensitive to the change in seasons, weather and reduced sunlight, there are some things you can do to help prevent SAD.

- Spend time outdoors in the sunlight, especially in the morning.
- Keep up with your social activities and maintain your routines, hobbies and favorite activities.
- Consider starting some winter hobbies.
- Be physically active every day. This helps release endorphins, the "feel good" brain chemicals.

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- Consider using a light therapy box.
- Eat healthful foods and consume fewer high-sugar foods and beverages. Research shows that sugar has a negative effect on mental health.

Treatment of SAD will depend on how severe the symptoms are. A mild case may be helped by spending more daytime hours outdoors and getting regular physical activity. A severe case may be helped by counseling, medicine, light therapy or all 3.

Whom to Call With Questions

Talk with your health care provider if you have questions about SAD.