

Seasonal Affective Disorder

People who experience serious mood changes that occur regularly with the change of seasons may have a disorder known as seasonal affective disorder, or SAD. Also known as the "winter blues," SAD is a type of depression related to the change of seasons. It typically occurs when the seasons change, and most symptoms begin in the fall and continue into the winter months. About 5 percent of the U.S. population experiences SAD.

If you are experiencing symptoms of SAD, it is best to see your health care provider or a counselor or therapist. In recent years, mental health professionals have developed a host of simple and effective treatments for SAD. The first step to feeling better is to acknowledge the problem and to seek help for an accurate clinical diagnosis and recommendations.

SAD can affect people anywhere, but the disorder is more common among people who live in northern latitudes. (One study identified SAD in 9.7 percent of people in New Hampshire, but in only 1.4 percent of those living in Florida.)

Understanding SAD

While it's common to feel a little blue during the winter, for some individuals the arrival of winter leads to a high level of emotional distress. If you have difficulty engaging in normal work and social activities each winter, you may be suffering from SAD. It has been linked to a biochemical imbalance in the brain brought on by the shorter days and decreased sunlight during winter. This imbalance can disrupt the body's sleep-wake rhythm, as well as the brain's production of the sleep hormone melatonin and the brain chemical serotonin, which affects mood.

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To receive a diagnosis of winter SAD, a person has to have had episodes of depression that begin in October or November and subside by March or April for at least two consecutive years. The core symptoms are lethargy, sleepiness, overeating and weight gain, and sadness. People with the disorder often tend to avoid social interaction. The most difficult months for people with winter SAD are January and February, although in some cases, symptoms worsen in the spring.

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Signs of SAD

People with SAD usually experience several of the following symptoms each winter:

- feelings of sadness or depression
- social withdrawal and a sense of isolation
- increased appetite (typically accompanied by a craving for sweets and carbohydrates)

- overeating and weight gain
- hopelessness
- lack of interest in activities that normally are pleasurable, such as visiting with friends or engaging in sexual relations
- irritability
- lethargy and low energy
- oversleep (though other sleep problems, such as insomnia, are also common)
- excessive guilt
- suicidal thoughts (if SAD gets worse when symptoms are not treated)

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See your health care provider if you think you may have SAD

If you think you may have SAD, you might first arrange to see your health care provider to make sure that you don't have any underlying medical problems. Your visit may include a physical exam and lab tests. You might also see a mental health professional (such as a psychiatrist or psychologist) for a mental health evaluation and to rule out another kind of depression. You may receive recommendations for mind-body support such as yoga, acupuncture, massage, and meditation.

Treatment and tips

Most treatments for SAD are the same as those prescribed for depression. However, some people respond to treatment aimed at compensating for the reduced amount of daylight in northern winters. Before you begin a course of treatment, you should always check with a medical or mental health professional.

Light therapy (phototherapy) may help. Studies show that light therapy is effective 80 percent of the time in treating SAD, although scientists are not yet sure exactly why it works. Treatment typically involves 20 to 30 minutes of exposure to a specialized bright artificial light, up to 100 times brighter than normal indoor lighting, soon after waking up each morning. Specially designed light-therapy boxes mimic outdoor light via a set of high-luminosity fluorescent bulbs. Several companies produce light boxes for consumers' direct purchase. Another option reported to help some people with SAD is a dawn simulator, an alarm clock-like device that wakes you up using gradually increasing light instead of abrupt sound.

Note: Ultraviolet and full spectrum light, heat lamps, or tanning lamps should not be used. It's important to check with your doctor before undertaking light therapy. Doctors advise against light therapy for people with bipolar disorder. You should also consult with your doctor if you've had eye problems such as cataracts, glaucoma, or diabetic eye damage.

Stay active. Don't let short days and cold weather keep you cooped up inside. Keep your mind and body active with wintertime activities in your community and social groups. If you know you're likely to experience SAD, schedule activities ahead of time so you'll have reasons to get out and about.

Spend time outdoors. Experts also recommend that people with SAD get as much daylight as possible each day. Outdoor light on a sunny day is at least five times as intense as the light provided by a light box. Even sitting or walking outside during winter on gray, overcast days will provide you with more light exposure than when you are inside in a well-lit room.

Get regular exercise. Exercising outdoors during the winter months can be very helpful for those suffering from SAD. It has been shown for many to be helpful in reducing symptoms of depression at any time of year.

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Keep to a regular schedule. This improves sleep and gives you exposure to light at the same times each day.

Spend time with family and friends. Avoid social isolation by spending time with friends and family whose company you enjoy. Normal social activities can lift your spirits, as can talking with someone about your seasonal blues.

Focus on healthy nutrition. Eat balanced, nutritious meals at regular intervals. Drink enough water and other healthy fluids to stay hydrated.

Seek professional help. Your health care provider may prescribe psychotherapy, an antidepressant, or both. For many people, a combination of light therapy plus medication and/or talk therapy is effective in treating SAD.

Anticipate the onset each year. Recognizing that it is likely you will deal with SAD each year may help you to adopt routines in advance to avoid feeling low in the fall. This may include a regular exercise routine and spending time outdoors, paying attention to your sleep routine, tweaking your diet to eat healthier foods, and planning ahead for regular dates with friends to keep you out and about. The more you have in place before the seasons start to change, the better you will deal with the onset of SAD each fall.

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