

Seasonal Affective Disorder

If you experience feelings of depression and lethargy during months of the year with less sunlight, you may be suffering from seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Do not be afraid to seek help and find out more about this common condition. There are treatments available that can help.

Understanding SAD

SAD is a form of depression that commonly begins in early fall and subsides in early spring. Over these darker, typically colder months, people with SAD often experience symptoms that include feelings of depression and lack of energy.

Although scientists are not exactly sure of the cause, research indicates that lack of sunlight can disrupt brain hormones and circadian rhythms, which control your body's biological clock. Experts theorize that people with SAD have biological clocks that run slower in the winter months. Some researchers believe that lack of sunlight may cause an imbalance of neurotransmitters, especially serotonin and dopamine. This imbalance may have a profound effect on mood. Other experts suggest that SAD patients have reduced retinal light sensitivity in the darker months.

Risk Factors

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), attributes that may increase your risk of SAD include:

- **Being female.** SAD is diagnosed four times more often in women than in men.
- **Living far from the equator.** SAD is more frequent in people who live far north or south of the equator. For example, 1 percent of those who live in Florida and 9 percent of those who live in New England or Alaska suffer from SAD.
- **Family history.** People with a family history of other types of depression are more likely to develop SAD than people who do not have a family history of depression.
- **Having depression or bipolar disorder.** The symptoms of depression may worsen with the seasons if you have one of these conditions (but SAD is diagnosed only if seasonal depressions are the most common).
- **Younger Age.** Younger adults have a higher risk of SAD than older adults. SAD has been reported even in children and teens.

Symptoms of SAD

SAD is often difficult to diagnose because its symptoms can mirror other disorders, including clinical depression. To be diagnosed with SAD, you must have experienced depression and other symptoms over at least two consecutive winters, followed by non-depressed periods in the spring and summer months. There also must be no other rationale for your mood and behavior changes.

Typical symptoms of SAD include:

- Feelings of depression
- Anxiety and irritability
- Lack of energy
- Decreased sex drive
- Lack of interest in pleasurable activities
- Social avoidance
- An increase in sleep and sleepiness
- Increased appetite and junk-food cravings
- Difficulty concentrating

If you experience any of the aforementioned symptoms, or even if you just feel depressed or routinely depleted of energy, ask your doctor whether your problem might be SAD and what treatment they would recommend.

Treatment

The four major types of treatment for SAD include:

- **Medication:** You may need to try several different antidepressant medications before finding one that improves your symptoms without causing problematic side effects. Talk to your doctor about the possible risks of using certain medications for your condition.
- **Light therapy:** This type of therapy is meant to replace the diminished sunshine of the fall and winter months by using daily exposure to bright, artificial light. Symptoms of SAD may be relieved by sitting in front of a lightbox first thing in the morning, daily from the early fall until spring. Most typically, light boxes filter out the ultraviolet rays and require 20-60 minutes of exposure to 10,000 lux of cool-white fluorescent light, an amount that is about 20 times greater than ordinary indoor lighting.
- **Psychotherapy:** Traditional cognitive behavioral therapy has been adapted for use with SAD (CBT-SAD). CBT-SAD relies on basic techniques of CBT such as identifying negative thoughts and replacing them with more positive thoughts along with a technique called behavioral activation. Behavioral activation seeks to help the person identify activities that are engaging and pleasurable, whether indoors or outdoors, to improve coping with winter.
- **Vitamin D:** At present, vitamin D supplementation by itself is not regarded as an effective SAD treatment. While some studies suggest vitamin D supplementation may be as effective as light therapy, others found vitamin D had no effect.

Your doctor may recommend these methods be used alone or in combination.

Tips for Coping with SAD

Try these suggestions to better cope with SAD:

- Spend more time outdoors, especially on sunny days.
- Plan vacations to bright, sunny climates during the fall and winter months.
- Start an exercise routine, and stick with it to boost energy levels.
- Resist the urge to oversleep, and get on a regular sleeping schedule that allows you to be awake as much as possible during sunlight hours. Avoid taking naps.
- Discipline yourself not to overeat. Avoid junk foods and environments that may encourage bingeing.
- Brighten your home. Add lamps, lighting fixtures, windows and skylights. Open all window treatments during the day.

Do not let SAD get you down. Shed light on your problem by looking into treatment options and learning all you can about the condition.

Resources

- International Foundation for Research and Education on Depression (iFRED): www.ifred.org
- Mental Health America (MHA): www.mentalhealthamerica.net
- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): www.nimh.nih.gov

Here when you need us.

Call: 844-207-5465

Online: guidanceresources.com

App: GuidanceNowSM

Web ID: LivingME

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