

Seasonal Affective Disorder

What is seasonal affective disorder?

Seasonal affective disorder (also called SAD) is a type of depression that is triggered by the seasons. The most common type of SAD is called winter-onset depression. Symptoms usually begin in late fall or early winter and go away by summer. A much less common type of SAD, known as summer-onset depression, usually begins in the late spring or early summer and goes away by winter. SAD may be related to changes in the amount of daylight during different times of the year.

How common is SAD?

As many as half a million people in the United States may have winter-onset depression. Another 10% to 20% may experience mild SAD. SAD is more common in women than in men. Although some children and teenagers get SAD, it usually doesn't start in people younger than 20 years of age. For adults, the risk of SAD decreases as they get older. Winter-onset SAD is more common in northern regions, where the winter season is typically longer and more harsh.

Symptoms

Although your symptoms are clues to the diagnosis, not everyone who has SAD experiences the same symptoms. Common symptoms of winter-onset SAD include the following:

- A change in appetite, especially a craving for sweet or starchy foods
- Weight gain
- A drop in energy level
- Fatigue
- A tendency to oversleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability and anxiety
- Increased sensitivity to social rejection
- Avoidance of social situations and a loss of interest in the activities you used to enjoy

SAD may also include some of the symptoms that are present in other forms of depression. These symptoms include feelings of guilt, ongoing feelings of hopelessness and physical problems (such as headaches).

Symptoms of SAD keep coming back year after year. They also tend to come and go at about the same time every year. The changes in mood are not necessarily related to obvious things that would make a certain season stressful (like regularly being unemployed during the

Is there treatment for SAD?

Yes, treatment is available for SAD. Winter-onset SAD is most likely caused by your body's reaction to the lack of sunlight. This changes important body rhythms that lead to symptoms. Light therapy is one option for treating this type of SAD because increased sunlight can improve symptoms.

If your doctor suggests you try light therapy, you may use a specially made light box. The usual brightness rating for the white light is 10,000 lux. You will sit in front of the light box for a certain length of time each day. Generally, light therapy takes about 30 minutes each day throughout the fall and winter, when you're most likely to be depressed. If light therapy helps, you'll continue it until enough sunlight is available, typically in the springtime. Stopping light therapy too soon can allow the symptoms to come back.

When used properly, light therapy seems to have very few side effects. However, some side effects may include eyestrain, headache, fatigue, irritability and inability to sleep (if light therapy is used too late in the day). Light therapy should be used carefully in people who have manic depressive disorders, skin that is sensitive to sunlight and/or medical conditions that make their eyes vulnerable to sunlight damage.

Tanning beds should not be used to treat SAD. The light sources in tanning beds are high in ultraviolet (UV) rays, which harm both your eyes and your skin.

Your doctor may also want you to try medicine or behavior therapy to treat your SAD. If light therapy or medicine alone doesn't work, your doctor may want you to use them together.

Other recommendations include:

Vitamin D3, 3000 IU a day

Exercise

Socialization

Use a written schedule to do daily chores immediately after arriving at home in the evening.

Then find an enjoyable activity to keep busy with for the rest of the evening.

Avoid complete inactivity for long periods of time.

Set up enjoyable events in the near future and throughout the winter.

How to obtain a season affective light for therapy:

Entering "lights for seasonal affective disorder" or a similar term in a search engine will allow for a variety of options for lights. The usual criteria are 1.) Full spectrum light and 2.) 10,000 lux (which is a measure of brightness). This is usually not paid for directly by insurance but many health savings accounts will allow for this.

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