

SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER (SAD)

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Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Fact:

The risk of SAD decreases with age.

Fiction:

It's a myth that the holidays cause SAD.

Treatment:

Many simple changes can prevent or improve SAD symptoms.

Like bears, people with Seasonal Affective Disorder just want to hibernate when winter comes.

Understanding SAD

For many, the shorter, darker days of autumn and winter trigger the onset of a condition called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). The word affective relates to emotions, and for those affected by SAD, their emotions go into a tailspin throughout the winter months, causing such symptoms as depression, fatigue, anxiety and social withdrawal that persist until spring brings longer, lighter days.

The human body has hundreds of 24-hour biological rhythms called circadian rhythms, all controlled by one internal clock. The sleep cycle is one rhythm, body temperature is another, and the brain's production of certain chemicals, like the nighttime hormone, melatonin, is yet another. In the spring and summer, when we wake up with the sun and go to bed when it gets dark, the body's internal clock is in synch with the sun. However, during the autumn and winter months, when most people must force themselves to wake up while it's still dark, the sleep-wake circadian rhythm can become thrown off kilter from all of the body's other circadian rhythms. This imbalance among the body's circadian rhythms appears to trigger the onset of SAD symptoms.

Who Has SAD?

Over 25 million Americans suffer from SAD.* Women with SAD outnumber men 4 to 1.** Although children and teenagers can become affected by SAD (recent childhood studies suggest as many as 6% of children between the ages of 9 and 19 get SAD), the condition usually doesn't affect those younger than 20. The risk of SAD decreases as one grows older. SAD tends to run in families, and is more likely to affect those who live farther north. For instance, SAD is seven times more common in Maine than it is in Florida.

Symptoms of SAD

Symptoms of (SAD) include:*

- An increased need for sleep, with a tendency to oversleep in the morning and to feel fatigued throughout the day with marked afternoon slumps
- Heavy feeling throughout the body, especially in the arms and/or legs
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities usually enjoyed, including sex
- Overeating accompanied by marked weight gain
- Cravings for starchy and/or sugary foods
- Physical aches and pains—headaches, stomachaches and sore muscles and joints that cannot otherwise be explained
- Difficulty concentrating and processing information

- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Interpersonal difficulties, including an increased sensitivity to rejection
- Social withdrawal

Most people with SAD have symptoms beginning with autumn's shorter, darker days, and subsiding during the spring and summer months. It's important to seek professional advice from a mental health professional as soon as possible, particularly if you notice that your sleep and appetite are affected and especially if you think about suicide.

Prevention and Treatment

SAD is very treatable; even the most severe cases can receive almost immediate relief once treatment has begun. Treatment options include therapy, medications and daily sessions of special artificial bright light. A combination may work best.

A few lifestyle changes can make a big difference to SAD sufferers:

- Exercising regularly throughout the winter months, either indoors near a window or out in the winter sunlight
- Increasing the amount of natural sunlight in your home by trimming outdoor foliage, keeping curtains and blinds open during daylight hours, adding skylights and lamps, and using light colors on walls and upholstery
- Sit near windows
- Sleep less and eat fewer carbohydrates than you're tempted to do
- Head for a sunny winter vacation

* 4Therapy

** The National Institute of Mental Health

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