

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Are the short, cold days bringing you down? Health experts report millions of people suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), a type of clinical depression that appears at certain times of the year. It usually starts with the shortening days of late autumn and lasts through the winter.

Since the days of winter get shorter the, it's estimated two to three per cent of the general population will experience SAD in their lifetime. Research studies report women are eight times more likely to suffer from SAD. Seasonal depression often first appears when people are in their 20s and 30s. The prevalence of SAD increases until the mid 50s, at which point the rates begins to decline. The prevalence of SAD among people over 65 is considerably lower.

The symptoms of SAD include:

- Change in appetite, in particular a craving for sweet or starchy foods
- Weight gain
- Decreased energy
- Fatigue
- Tendency to oversleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Avoidance of social situations
- Feelings of anxiety and despair

What causes Seasonal Affective Disorder?

- Fewer daylight hours may reduce important mood altering chemicals in the brain
- Reduced retinal sensitivity to light
- Low winter temperatures may trigger the body to rest and disrupt circadian rhythms
- Barometric pressure and precipitant levels
- Psychological mechanisms and personality traits may all be contributing factors.

How is SAD treated?

If you feel depressed for long periods during autumn and winter, if your sleep and appetite patterns change dramatically and you should seek professional help, for instance, from your family doctor. There is effective treatment for SAD. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), even people with severe symptoms can get rapid relief once they begin treatment.

People with mild symptoms can benefit from spending more time outdoors during the day and by arranging their environments so that they receive maximum sunlight. Trim tree branches that block light, for example, and keep curtains open during the day. Move

furniture so that you sit near a window. Installing skylights and adding lamps can also help.

Exercise relieves stress, builds energy and increases your mental and physical well-being. Build physical activity into your lifestyle before SAD symptoms take hold. If you exercise indoors, position yourself near a window. Make a habit of taking a daily noon-hour walk. The activity and increased exposure to natural light can raise your spirits.

A winter vacation in a sunny destination can also temporarily relieve SAD symptoms, although symptoms usually recur after return home. At home, work at resisting the carbohydrate and sleep cravings that come with SAD.

Many people with SAD respond well to exposure to bright, artificial light. “Light therapy” involves sitting beside a special fluorescent light box for several minutes day. A health care professional should be consulted before beginning light therapy.

Increasing your exposure to light, monitoring your diet, sleep patterns and exercise levels are important first steps. For those who are severely affected, devising a treatment plan with a health care professional consisting of light therapy, medication and cognitive-behavioural therapy may also be needed.

Tips to ease your symptoms

- Spend more time outdoors
- Keep curtains open during the day
- Move furniture so that you sit near a window
- Install skylights and add lamps
- Build physical activity into your lifestyle
- Make a habit of taking a daily noon-hour walk

Our EAP coordinators based here in Vancouver are here to help give us a call.

Sources: Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information