

PSA IN GOOD HEALTH: SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER—SAD

Winter...the days get shorter, the leaves fall off the trees, the ground is cold and brown, and sometimes the sun doesn't shine for days. Many of us respond by becoming couch potatoes wrapped in blankets to keep us warm, avoiding going outside, and hibernating. But how do you know when there's a bigger problem?

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a category of depression that often emerges in the late fall/winter months.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SAD?

SAD symptoms might include a depressed mood, feelings of hopelessness, a lack of energy, difficulty concentrating, changes in sleep and appetite, loss of pleasure in activities you once loved, and even thoughts of death or suicide. Other symptoms might include the below:

- Heaviness in arms and legs
- Frequent oversleeping
- Cravings for carbohydrates/weight gain
- Relationship problems

WHAT CAUSES SAD?

A specific cause for SAD has not been discovered. What we do know is several factors are at play. Less sunlight in winter can throw your biological clock out of whack and reduce levels of serotonin (a brain chemical that regulates your mood) and melatonin (a chemical which regulates sleep and mood).

If you are young and female, you are also at increased risk for SAD. People who live farther from the equator or have a family history of depression also experience the symptoms more frequently.

WHEN SHOULD I CALL THE DOCTOR?

All of us will have days this winter when we feel sluggish or unmotivated. But if your symptoms are causing disruptions in your life, then never hesitate to reach out to a professional. If symptoms occur for days at a time, you notice major shifts in sleeping or eating, you are withdrawing socially, or the activities that usually boost your mood don't work, seek treatment. Seek emergency treatment if you are using alcohol to manage symptoms or you are experiencing suicidal thoughts.

BUT WHAT CAN I DO TODAY?

In addition to seeking help from your doctor, there are lifestyle changes that can improve symptoms and lift your mood. Try going outside more often, getting plenty of sunlight, exercising, avoiding drugs and alcohol, getting plenty of sleep, and practicing relaxation exercises. Planning a healthier lifestyle is never a bad idea. Eating healthier and getting back on that exercise program won't hurt either!

