

PSA In Good Health: Seasonal Affective Disorder

WHAT IS SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER?

Seasonal affective disorder is a form of depression also known as SAD, seasonal depression or winter depression. People with SAD experience mood changes and symptoms like depression. The symptoms usually occur during the fall and winter months when there is less sunlight and usually improve with the arrival of spring. The most difficult months for people with SAD in the U.S. tend to be January and February. While it is much less common, some people experience SAD in the summer.

SAD is more than just “winter blues.” The symptoms can be distressing and overwhelming and can interfere with daily functioning. However, it can be treated. It is more common among women than men.

SAD has been linked to a biochemical imbalance in the brain prompted by shorter daylight hours and less sunlight in winter. As seasons change, people experience a shift in their biological internal clock or circadian rhythm that can cause them to be out of sync with their daily schedule.

SYMPTOMS:

Common symptoms of SAD include fatigue, even with too much sleep, and weight gain associated with overeating and carbohydrate cravings. SAD symptoms can vary from mild to severe:

- Feeling of sadness or depressed mood
- Marked loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed
- Changes in appetite; usually eating more, craving carbohydrates
- Change in sleep; usually sleeping too much
- Loss of energy or increased fatigue despite increased sleep hours
- Increase in restless activity (e.g., hand-wringing or pacing) or slowed movements and speech
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Trouble concentrating or making decisions
- Thoughts of death or suicide or attempts at suicide

SAD may begin at any age, but it typically starts when a person is between ages 18 and 30.

TREATMENT:

SAD can be effectively treated in several ways, including light therapy, antidepressant medications, talk therapy or some combination of these. While symptoms will generally improve on their own with the change of season, symptoms can improve more quickly with treatment. Light therapy involves sitting in front of a light therapy box that emits very bright light (and filters out harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays). It usually requires 20 minutes or more a day, typically first thing in the morning, during the winter. Most people see some improvements from light therapy within one or two weeks of beginning treatment. To maintain the benefits and prevent relapse, treatment is usually continued through the winter. Because of the anticipated return of symptoms in late fall, some people may begin light therapy in early fall to prevent symptoms.

Talk therapy, particularly cognitive behavior therapy, can effectively treat SAD. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are the type of antidepressant most commonly used to treat SAD.

For some people, increased exposure to sunlight can help improve symptoms of SAD. For example, spending time outside or arranging your home or office so that you are exposed to a window during the day. Taking care of your general health and wellness can also help. Regular exercise, healthy eating, getting enough sleep, staying active and connected, participating in group activities, and getting together with friends and family can help.

If you feel you have symptoms of SAD, seek the help of a trained medical professional. Just as with other forms of depression, it is important to make sure there is no other medical condition causing symptoms. SAD can be misdiagnosed as hypothyroidism, hypoglycemia, infectious mononucleosis, and other viral infections, so proper evaluation is key. A mental health professional can diagnose the condition and discuss therapy options. With the right treatment, SAD can be a manageable condition.

If you feel the depression is severe or if you are experiencing suicidal thoughts, consult a doctor immediately or seek help at the closest emergency room. [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicidal-thoughts-and-behavior/index.shtml) – 800-273-TALK (8255).