Depression Health Center

Seasonal Depression (Seasonal Affective Disorder)

Do the bleak winter months get you down more than you think they should? Maybe you have seasonal depression, also known as seasonal affective disorder or SAD. Seasonal depression is a mood disorder that happens every year at the same time. A rare form of seasonal depression, known as "summer depression," begins in late spring or early summer and ends in fall. But in general, seasonal affective disorder starts in fall or winter and ends in spring or early summer.

What Causes Seasonal Affective Disorder?

There are two seasonal patterns with SAD. One starts in the fall and continues through the winter, and the other starts in late spring or early summer. The fall-onset type of SAD, often referred to as "winter depression," is better known and easier to recognize -- and we know more about it than we know about its counterpart.

Hormones manufactured deep in the brain automatically trigger attitudinal changes at certain times of year. Experts believe that SAD is related to these hormonal changes. One theory is that reduced sunlight during fall and winter leads to reduced production of serotonin in the brain. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that has a soothing, calming effect. The result of there not being enough serotonin is feelings of depression along with symptoms of fatigue, carbohydrate craving, and weight gain.

Because foods high in carbohydrates (chips, pretzels, cookies) boost serotonin, it is thought that they have a calming, soothing affect on the body and mind.

SAD usually starts in young adulthood and is more common in females than in males. Some people with SAD experience very mild symptoms and feel out of sorts or irritable. Others have debilitating symptoms that interfere with relationships and productivity.

Because the lack of enough daylight during wintertime is related to SAD, it is seldom found in countries within 30 degrees of the equator, where there is plenty of sunshine year round.

What Are the Symptoms of SAD During Winter?

People with SAD have many of the normal signs of depression, including:

- Decreased levels of energy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue
- Increase in appetite
- Increased desire to be alone
- Increased need for sleep
- Weight gain

What Are the Signs of SAD During Summer?

http://www.webmd.com/depression/guide/seasonal-affective-disorder?page=2&bookmark=true&login=t...
Symptoms of summer SAD include:

- Decreased appetite
- Trouble sleeping
- Weight loss

How Is Seasonal Affective Disorder Diagnosed?

It is very important to take yourself seriously if you have symptoms of depression. Sometimes, physical problems can cause depression. But other times, it may be part of a more complex psychiatric problem. At the health professions, you should get a thorough medical evaluation.

How Is Seasonal Depression Treated?

There are different treatment options for seasonal depression. It depends on the severity of your symptoms. Also, if you have a history of depression, the treatment may be different. May your doctor recommend the treatment that is right for you?

What Is Light Therapy for SA?

Light therapy for SAD uses a full spectrum bright light that is used to directly hit your eyes. Whet you use light therapy, you need to be kept away from bright light outside the treatment room.

Some people with SAD recover with light therapy. Other treatments may include the light therapy sessions. People may use light therapy when they are not sure if it is effective.

Does Light Therapy Work for Seasonal Depression?

Some researchers have looked at seasonal depression and melatonin, which causes drowsiness. They have found that light therapy can help improve mood.

Experts believe that light therapy may be effective in treating SAD. If you have depression, you should see a doctor. The doctor will recommend the best treatment for you.

Can I Prevent Seasonal Affective Disorder?

If you have been diagnosed with seasonal affective disorder, there are treatments that can help prevent it. They include:

- Light therapy
- Medication
- Lifestyle changes
Try to spend some amount of time outside every day, even when it's very cloudy. The effects of daylight are still beneficial.

Begin using a light box when fall starts, even before you feel the effects of winter SAD.

Eat a well-balanced diet, including sufficient amounts of vitamins and minerals as recommended by the FDA. This will help you have more energy even if your body is craving starchy and sweet foods.

Try exercising for 30 minutes a day, three times a week.

Stay involved with your social circle and regular activities. Social support is extremely important for those with mood disorders, especially during winter months.

**When Should I Call my Doctor About Seasonal Depression?**

If you experience feelings of depression, fatigue, and irritability that come at the same time each year and appear to be seasonal in nature, you may have a form of SAD. Talk openly with your doctor about your feelings. Follow the doctor's recommendations for lifestyle changes and/or treatment if you have SAD.

If your doctor recommends light therapy, ask if the practice provides light boxes for patients with SAD. You can also rent or purchase a light box, but they are expensive and health insurance companies do not usually cover them. While side effects are minimal with light therapy, be cautious if you have sensitive skin or a history of bipolar disorder.

**Further Reading:**

- Holiday Depression Triggers
- What is Seasonal Affective Disorder/Winter Depression?
- Understanding Treatment of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)
- Understanding the Basics of Seasonal Affective Disorder
- Understanding the Symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)
- Ho, Ho, Ho-Hum: Holidays Not Always Filled With Joy
- FDA Approves First Drug for SAD

**WebMD Medical Reference**

**SOURCES:**

- American Academy of Family Physicians: "Seasonal Affective Disorder."
- National Institute of Mental Health: "What Is Depression?"
- National Institute of Mental Health: Science Update: "Properly Timed Light, Melatonin Lift Winter Depression by Syncing Rhythms."

Reviewed by Joseph Goldberg, MD on July 22, 2012

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