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Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)



Is it more than just the “Winter Blues”?

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression which follows the seasons. SAD typically occurs during the winter months, starting late fall or early winter, and ends when summer begins. A less common type of SAD occurs during the summer months. SAD is characteristically associated with the changes in the amount of day light, which differs with the seasons.

Winter’s shorter days and longer nights may cause fatigue, lack of energy and an array of other problems that should not be overlooked just as the “winter blues”, or something that you must struggle to get through on your own. Getting treatment for seasonal affective disorder can help you not to dread the winter months.

Symptoms or signs of SAD are “cyclic”, which means that they come and go usually during the same time every year. While SAD affects most people during the winter months, and goes away during sunnier days, sometimes it affects people oppositely. Either way, SAD can start out very mild and end up being a very serious disorder.²

Signs of Fall and Winter SAD:

- Depression
- Lack of Energy
- Increased need for sleep
- Mood Changes
- Social withdrawal
- Weight gain

- Anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating and processing information
- Lack of enjoyment

What are the causes of SAD?

The exact cause of SAD is not known, but the following are some speculations that may be behind this disorder:

- **Serotonin-** Some physicians believe that a lack of this neurotransmitter can be a mood affecter. A reduction of sunlight can cause a loss of serotonin.
- **Melatonin-** This sleep-related hormone has been linked to depression, and is also usually more prevalent during the longer winter nights. Thus the increase may cause an increase in depression.
- **Cardiac Rhythm-** Some physicians also speculate that cardiac rhythms are disrupted during the winter months. With your "internal clock" off, this may lead to depression or other symptoms of SAD.

How can SAD be treated?

First to treat SAD there must be a diagnosis made. SAD is an unofficial distinct disorder, but is often a subtype of depression or bipolar disorder.²

The diagnosis is made through a psychological evaluation. Some questions that may be asked include are you experiencing changes in your mood, thoughts, or behavior; as well as changes in sleeping and/or eating patterns. Sometimes a physical evaluation may be needed to see if there are other health problems causing these depression symptoms.

Although diagnosing SAD can sometimes be very difficult, it is very important to tell your treating physician if you have had these symptoms for more then 2 consecutive years during the same seasons, had times of depression followed by times without depression, or if there is no other reason for changes in your mood or behavior.²



Treatment of SAD

Research has shown that light therapy, or exposure to light, is often an effective treatment for winter SAD. Light therapy utilizes a 10,000-lux light box, which has white florescent tubes covered with a plastic screen that blocks

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(540) 989-6605 or 800-699-9396

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ultraviolet light. A patient may sit in front of the box for 10-15 minutes starting, and increasing to 30 to 45 minute sessions. This therapy typically continues until spring.⁴ Using this light therapy is very similar to outdoor light, and causes biochemical changes in the brain to lift your mood. Light therapy is usually very easy to use and has few side affects. But along with using light therapy it is **HIGHLY** recommended that a patient also continues with counseling. If necessary, medications may also be used.²

Seasonal affective disorder is often overlooked, and most try to “wait out” the signs and symptoms, but this should not be the case. If you experience any of these signs or symptoms they should be addressed as soon as possible.

References:

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 3. Seasonal Affective Disorder, Medline Plus-U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health, <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus>
 4. Seasonal Affective Disorder: Winter Depression, Northern County Psychiatric Associates, <http://www.ncpamd.com>
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