

SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER (SAD)

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that is correlated with the seasons of the year. This is also referred to as "winter blues". Many individuals with SAD exhibit symptoms during fall and winter. Although rare, symptoms can occur during late spring and summer. SAD is most common in young adult women, and is thought to affect as many as 6 of every 100 people. About ten percent of the general population experience mild, seasonal mood swings and so not have symptoms severe enough to meet the criteria for SAD. Roughly 10-20% of the general population experience mild seasonal mood changes, but these symptoms do not interfere with functioning in the way that SAD does.

The symptoms of SAD usually recur about the same time every year. Winter-related SAD can include most of the symptoms of Major Depression, sleeping more than usual, a craving for sugar, starchy foods, or alcohol and related weight gain, interpersonal conflicts and a sense of heaviness in their arms and legs. Symptoms of SAD in the summer are somewhat different than winter SAD. People may experience difficulties sleeping, weight loss and agitation. Many sufferers show a preference for bright lights and tend to use artificial lighting when natural lighting is not available.

Treatment for SAD may include physician recommendations to spend increased time in the sun, bright light therapy or antidepressants. Your psychiatrist will be the one to evaluate which type of treatment would be best and pose the least risk for you. S/he will also want to evaluate whether you are taking medications or dietary supplements that increase your light sensitivity. If you are, these will impact your reaction to light and the type of treatment which is selected to treat SAD. Psychotherapy is also recommended to enhance coping skills, such as those taught in brief psychotherapy, and may also be helpful in treating the associated negative thinking and behavior patterns. People suffering from SAD should also be evaluated for other mood disorders and psychiatric conditions.