

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Some people experience a serious mood change during the winter months, when there is less natural sunlight. This condition is called seasonal affective disorder (SAD). SAD is a type of depression, and usually lifts during spring and summer.

Seasonal affective disorder impacts those who live in specific geographical areas, typically those who live in northern or southern hemispheres but is extremely rare in people who live close to the equator.¹

SAD symptoms

SAD's is a fairly common form of depression that occurs in the winter. During the winter days are shorter. Shortened days increase the chances of someone to develop SAD's due to the lack of natural sunlight. Common symptoms may include:


- Sad, anxious, or “empty” feelings
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling guilty, worthless, or helpless
- Irritability and restlessness
- Loss of interest in activities
- Loss of energy
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details and making decisions
- Difficulty falling sleeping or oversleeping
- Changes in weight
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Seasonal changes in bipolar disorder

In some people with bipolar disorder, spring and summer can bring on symptoms of mania or a less intense form of mania (hypomania). This is known as reverse seasonal affective disorder. Signs and symptoms of reverse seasonal affective disorder include:

- Persistently elevated mood
- Hyperactivity
- Agitation
- Unbridled enthusiasm out of proportion to the situation
- Rapid thoughts and speech

There are some measures you can take on your own that may help. You can make your environment brighter by sitting near windows and being exposed to more light. It is also helpful to get outdoors and be exposed to the sun and daylight. Regular exercise can help relieve the stress and anxiety brought on by SAD.



About 4 to 6 percent of people suffer from SAD's and an additional 10 to 20 percent may suffer from mild SAD.²

Treatments

SAD may be effectively treated with light therapy. But nearly half of people with SAD do not respond to light therapy alone. It is important to speak to your doctor about how you feel and determine the right treatment plan for you.

Here are a few tips on how you can manage SAD. Remember to speak with your doctor at any point about how you feel, and to determine the right treatment plan for you.

- Get enough sleep and practice good sleep habits
- Eat a healthy diet
- Try to exercise more often and find activities that make you happy
- Avoid alcohol and illegal drugs
- Talk with family and friends
- Stay active

When you are struggling with depression, talk about how you're feeling to someone you trust. Try to be around people who are caring and positive. Volunteer or get involved in group activities.

People who have had repeated seasonal depression should talk to a mental health care professional about prevention methods. Starting treatment during the fall or early winter, before the symptoms of SAD begin, may be helpful.

Resources

Seasonal Affective Disorder – National Alliance on Mental Illness

www.nami.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Inform_Yourself/About_Mental_Illness/By_Illness/Seasonal_Affective_Disorder.htm

National Institute of Mental Health – SAD

www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression/index.shtml

1. www.mentalhealthamerica.net
2. *American Family Physician, Seasonal Affective Disorder* (www.aafp.org/afp/2000/0301/p1531.html)

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