

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that occurs with changing seasons. It is sometimes referred to as the “winter blues.” It typically begins in the fall and lasts through the winter months. Less commonly, people experience SAD in the spring and summer months. During a usual SAD experience, the symptoms are mild in the fall and progressively get worse through the winter period. Once spring arrives, the symptoms typically start to fade away but may return later in the year.

SAD is thought to occur due to chemical changes in the brain from less sunlight and shorter days. Less sunlight in the fall and winter months may throw off the body’s internal clock. With less exposure to sunlight, serotonin levels decrease due to lower vitamin D and melatonin levels rise. It is more common in women than men and for people living far from the equator.

Many of the symptoms are similar to depression but tend to occur and then ease around the same time each year. Common symptoms include having less energy, feeling moody or sad, losing interest in activities previously enjoyed, social withdrawal, sleeping more, weight gain, difficulty concentrating, and feeling hopeless.

Light therapy can be used to treat SAD, which involves sitting near a special kind of lamp called a lightbox each morning for a period of time. Seeking therapy with a counselor can also be helpful. Talking through your feelings with a trained professional can help manage SAD-related challenges. Lastly, medications, such as antidepressants, can sometimes be helpful in treating chemical imbalances.

If you suspect you are experiencing SAD, it might be a good idea to make an appointment with your primary care doctor to have your vitamin D levels checked. Many people who live in climates with more extreme winters have lower vitamin D levels and could benefit from supplementation. Also, try to spend more time outside or near a window that gets bright light, which can help prevent and treat SAD.

Other steps you can take to prevent or ease symptoms include spending time with family and friends, exercising regularly, eating well-balanced meals, and often reminding yourself of what you are grateful for in your life. It may take time to start to feel better but be patient with yourself. Get the help you need and prioritize taking care of yourself.