Winter Blues: Understanding Seasonal Affective Disorder

Nashoba Valley Medical Center primary care physician offers an overview of this form of depression, people generally eat and sleep less and lose weight; people with SAD usually eat and sleep more and gain weight when it is cold and dark outside.

Women experience SAD more often than men and it can occur at any age. In many types of depression, people generally eat and sleep less and lose weight; people with SAD usually eat and sleep more and gain weight when it is cold and dark outside.

What Is Seasonal Affective Disorder?

SAD is a type of seasonal depression that is thought to be caused by changes in daylight and the lack of exposure to light. The symptoms may begin in the fall and last until the early spring.

What Are the Symptoms?

The following symptoms typically begin in the fall, intensify in winter, and subside in spring: depressed mood, feelings of sadness; cravings for sweet or starchy foods; overeating; significant weight gain or loss; decreased energy; mood; feelings of hopelessness; difficulty concentrating; and decreased sexual desire.

Why does SAD occur? People are diagnosed with seasonal affective disorder (SAD) if they experience depressed moods, feel down and gain weight when it is cold and dark outside. Patients who have difficulty dealing with the darker, shorter days of the season may be diagnosed with seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

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"During the winter months, I often see patients who have difficulty dealing with the darker, shorter days of the season."
Are You Getting Your Daily D?
You take a multivitamin, so you assume you're getting enough vitamin D, the vitamin critical for bone health. But, how much vitamin D do you need and how does it affect your overall health?

Vitamin D is a fat-soluble vitamin found in food and made by your body after sun exposure. Vitamin D promotes calcium absorption, keeps your bones and muscles strong and may boost your immune system and prevent certain cancers. You may not be getting enough vitamin D if you:
- Have limited sun exposure;
- Don't consume enough vitamin D–rich foods;
- Are African-American or have dark skin; or
- Are over age 50.

The Institute of Medicine recommends:
- 400 IU a day for adults ages 51 to 69
- 600 IU for adults 70 and older

How Does SAD Differ From Other Types of Depression?
The main difference between SAD and other types of depression is that SAD occurs seasonally, usually during the winter months. SAD, like other types of clinical depression, is not caused by social factors, although such stresses can exacerbate it. Symptoms such as depression, weight gain, and excessive sleepiness are characteristic of SAD.

How Can SAD Be Treated?
Light Therapy. In this treatment, a person is exposed to light that is five to 20 times brighter than regular indoor lighting by sitting close to a light box for 15 minutes to a few hours a day. The length of time and intensity of the light can vary depending on your sensitivity to light. Light therapy can range from a 15-minute exposure to bright light several times a week to sitting close to a light box for 15 minutes twice a week.

Lifestyle Changes. Certain lifestyle changes may be helpful. Increase your exposure to outdoor light by taking daily walks during the morning and exercising regularly. Regular aerobic exercise can help improve your mood. In addition, regular aerobic exercise can help improve your mood. In the morning, regular aerobic exercise can help improve your mood.

Medications. Antidepressant medicines can be used to treat SAD. These medicines may be used along with light therapy. Use of light therapy in conjunction with medicine may also make it possible to take smaller doses of medicine. Be sure to consult with your doctor to get the help that you need.

If you have mild SAD symptoms, increase your exposure to regular indoor and outdoor light. Start a walking program or a daily exercise regime. If you have symptoms that are interfering with your quality of life, talk to your doctor to get the help that you need.