

POPULATION HEALTH

Seasonal Affective Disorder is More Than ‘The Winter Blues’

By Dr. Joel Axler, *National Behavioral Health Leader*



Seasonal affective disorder, known as SAD, is a form of depression in which mood changes usually occur during the fall and winter months when there is less sunlight, and generally improve in spring. Typical signs of SAD include craving carbohydrates, sleeping more than usual and having little motivation. For people with SAD in the United States, the most difficult months are January and February.

SAD is more than just “winter blues.” The symptoms can be distressing and overwhelming and can interfere with daily functioning. According to the American Psychiatric Association, approximately 5% of adults in the U.S. experience SAD, and it is more common among women than men.¹

SAD has been linked to a biochemical imbalance in the brain prompted by shorter daylight hours and less sunlight in winter. As seasons change, people experience a shift in their biological, internal clock or circadian rhythm that can cause them to be out of step with their daily schedule.

Symptoms and Diagnosis

Common symptoms of SAD include fatigue and weight gain associated with overeating and carbohydrate cravings. SAD symptoms can vary from mild to severe and can include many symptoms similar to major depression, such as:¹

- **Feeling sad** or having a depressed mood
- **Loss of interest or pleasure** in activities once enjoyed
- **Changes in appetite**; usually eating more, craving carbohydrates
- **Change in sleep**; usually sleeping too much
- **Loss of energy** or increased fatigue despite increased sleep hours
- **Increase in purposeless physical activity** (e.g., inability to sit still, pacing, handwringing) or slowed movements (these actions must be severe enough to be observable to others)
- **Feeling worthless or guilty**
- **Difficulty thinking**, concentrating or making decisions
- **Thoughts of death or suicide**

SAD may begin at any age, but it typically starts when a person is between 18 and 30.

¹ www.apa.org/topics/depression/seasonal-affective-disorder

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD): More Than the Winter Blues

As the days get shorter and there is less daylight, you may start to feel sad. While many people experience the “winter blues,” some people may have a type of depression called seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

The first step is to determine how much your symptoms interfere with your daily life.

Do you have mild symptoms that have lasted less than 2 weeks?



- Feeling down but still able to take care of yourself and others
- Having some trouble sleeping
- Having less energy than usual but still able to do your job, schoolwork, or housework

These activities can make you feel better:



- Doing something you enjoy
- Going outside in the sunlight
- Spending time with family and friends
- Eating healthy and avoiding foods with lots of sugar

If these activities do not help or your symptoms are getting worse, talk to a health care provider.

Do you have more severe symptoms that have lasted more than 2 weeks?



- Social withdrawal
- Oversleeping
- Gaining weight
- Craving foods with lots of sugar like cakes, candies, and cookies

Seek professional help:



- Light therapy
- Psychotherapy (talk therapy)
- Medications
- Vitamin D supplements

For help finding treatment, visit [nimh.nih.gov/findhelp](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp).

If you or someone you know is in immediate distress or is thinking about hurting themselves, call or text the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at **988** or chat at 988lifeline.org.



National Institute
of Mental Health

[nimh.nih.gov/sad](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/sad)

NIMH Identification No. OM 22-4320



Treatment

Treatment for SAD typically includes a combination of light therapy, psychotherapy and medication. Light therapy involves sitting in front of a lightbox for a certain amount of time each day, usually in the morning. The light box emits a bright light that mimics sunlight and can help to regulate the body's circadian rhythm.

Psychotherapy, or talk therapy, can also help manage the symptoms of SAD. A therapist can work with an individual to identify and change negative thoughts and behaviors and to develop coping strategies for dealing with the symptoms of SAD.

Antidepressant medication can also be used. The medications work by changing the levels of certain chemicals in the brain, such as serotonin and norepinephrine, which can help improve mood and reduce symptoms of depression.

It is also important to take care of yourself during the winter months. This includes getting enough sleep,

eating a healthy diet and staying physically active. Get outside during the day and supplement your diet with essentials like fish oil, tryptophan and vitamin D products. While the winter blues provide time to curl up and relax, exercise can help to boost mood, increase energy levels and reduce stress.

For some people with SAD, planning a vacation to a sunnier climate during the winter months is helpful. Even a weekend getaway can help to boost mood and provide a break from the long, dark days of winter. Expressing gratitude triggers a surge of feel-good brain chemicals like dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin. Helping others has been a long-standing practice in many cultures that can help improve seasonal depression.

If you feel you have symptoms of SAD, seek the help of a trained medical professional. With the proper treatment, SAD can be a manageable condition.



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