

# Health Tips

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## Health Tip: Seasonal Affective Disorder



With the shortening of daylight hours and lack of sunlight in winter, some people suffer from symptoms of depression. This condition, known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is recognized by the American Psychiatric Association as a type of mood disorder. SAD has been linked to a biochemical imbalance in the brain and occurs most commonly during the months of January and February.

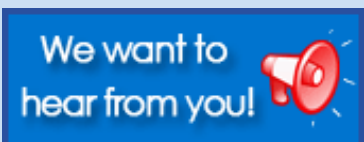
**How can lack of sunlight lead to depression?** Even though the mechanism for the development of SAD is not completely understood, it is clear that light affects brain chemistry. With varying amounts of sunlight, people experience a shift in their circadian rhythm or "internal clock" that regulates the 24-hour cycle of biological and mental processes. This alteration in circadian rhythm, along with changes in a sleep-related hormone known as melatonin, is thought to underlie the development of SAD.

**How is SAD diagnosed?** There are no blood tests to confirm the presence of SAD. The diagnosis is made based on the characteristic signs and symptoms that occur during predictable times of the year. Symptoms of SAD can include:

- fatigue or excessive sleeping
- depression (feelings of sadness, apathy, hopelessness, etc.) combined with irritability
- lack of interest in normal activities or in social interactions
- overeating and weight gain or sometimes weight loss

Many people with longstanding, recurrent SAD note improvement in their symptoms during the spring and summer months and worsening in the winter. Younger adults between the ages of 18 and 30, as well as women are thought to be at higher risk for developing SAD. Since symptoms of SAD can be confused with other medical conditions, such as hypothyroidism or viral infections. It is a good idea to leave the diagnosis to a medical professional.

any other topic or question you have!



**Is there anything that I can do to prevent SAD?** Those who are susceptible to the effects of shorter days or who experience mild symptoms of SAD may be able to circumvent more severe symptoms with attention to the following:

- Increase exposure to sunlight. Open blinds and arrange your home or office to take advantage of sunlight during the day.
- Get regular exercise. This can help relieve stress as well as improve sleep patterns. If nothing else, take a walk during the sunny part of the day.
- Socialize so that you stay connected with people you enjoy being around.
- Although not always practical, taking a trip to a sunnier part of the world during the winter can help to reset one's internal clock to a more summer-like state.

**What can be done when SAD becomes more severe?** In 2 to 5% of those with SAD, the condition goes from just being a case of the "winter blues" to a more severe depression that is disruptive to daily living. In these cases, light



therapy (phototherapy) has proven an effective treatment option. Typically this involves exposure to a special florescent lamp for 30 minutes, up to a couple of hours each day. Phototherapy is thought to suppress the body's natural release of melatonin and help reset the "internal clock". Research has shown that carefully timed administration of melatonin can also help to reestablish normal circadian rhythm and help with symptoms of SAD. An herbal remedy used in the treatment of depression, St. John's Wort, showed promise in early studies, but is not currently thought to be of benefit in the treatment of SAD. Certain prescription antidepressants, e.g. Wellbutrin, however, have been shown to be

beneficial, as has formal psychotherapy.

For some people, SAD may be confused with a more serious condition like major depression or bipolar disorder. For this reason, you should speak with your health care provider if you think that you have SAD. With the right course of treatment, SAD can be a very manageable condition.

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