

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that is related to the changes in seasons. SAD begins and ends at about the same time every year. If you're like most people with SAD, your symptoms start in the fall and continue into the winter months, zapping your energy and making you feel moody.

Treatment for SAD may include light therapy (phototherapy), medications, and/or counseling.

Don't brush off that yearly feeling as simply a case of the "winter blues" or a seasonal funk that you must tough-out on your own. Take steps to keep your mood and motivation steady throughout the year.

Signs and symptoms:

- Feeling depressed most of the day, nearly every day
- Losing interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Having low energy
- Having problems with sleeping
- Experiencing changes in your appetite or weight
- Feeling sluggish or agitated
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Feeling hopeless, worthless or guilty
- Having frequent thoughts of death or suicide
- Social withdrawal
- School or work problems
- Substance abuse

Causes: The specific cause of seasonal affective disorder remains unknown. Some factors that may come into play include:

- **Your biological clock (circadian rhythm).** The reduced level of sunlight in fall and winter may cause winter-onset SAD. This decrease in sunlight may disrupt your body's internal clock and lead to feelings of depression.
- **Serotonin levels.** A drop in serotonin, a brain chemical (neurotransmitter) that affects mood, might play a role in SAD. Reduced sunlight can cause a drop in serotonin that may trigger depression; i.e., low Vitamin D.
- **Melatonin levels.** The change in season can disrupt the balance of the body's level of melatonin, which plays a role in sleep patterns and mood.

Risk Factors: Seasonal affective disorder is diagnosed more often in women than in men. And SAD occurs more frequently in younger adults than in older adults. Factors that may increase your risk of seasonal affective disorder include:

- **Family history.** People with SAD may be more likely to have blood relatives with SAD or another form of depression.
- **Having major depression or bipolar disorder.** Symptoms of depression may worsen seasonally if you have one of these conditions.
- **Living far from the equator.** SAD appears to be more common among people who live far north or south of the equator. This may be due to decreased sunlight during the winter and longer days during the summer months.

When to see a doctor: It's normal to have some days when you feel down. But if you feel down for days at a time and you can't get motivated to do activities you normally enjoy, see your doctor. This is especially important if your sleep patterns and appetite have changed, you turn to alcohol for comfort or relaxation, or you feel hopeless or think about suicide.

See <https://www.mayoclinic.org> for additional information.

Questions? Contact us at 363ISRW.ART.363ISRW@us.af.mil or at 757-764-9316