

### **Introduction**

Seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, is a type of depression. In most cases it is experienced during the winter months when there is less natural sunlight. Seasonal affective disorder may be effectively treated with light therapy. But nearly half of people with SAD do not respond to light therapy alone.

This reference summary reviews the causes and symptoms of seasonal affective disorder. It also discusses who is at risk for SAD and how it is treated.



### **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)**

Seasonal affective disorder is a serious mood change that some people experience during the winter months when there is less natural sunlight. Seasonal affective disorder is also known as SAD.

SAD is a type of depression that usually lifts during the spring and summer months.

For a small number of people with seasonal affective disorder, depression lifts during the fall and winter months. This is sometimes called “reverse SAD.” Reverse SAD may be caused by high heat and humidity that keeps people indoors and out of the sun. An even smaller number experience depression during winter and summer. These people feel fine during fall and spring.

SAD can start at any age. However, most cases of SAD begin between the ages of 18 and 30.

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## Symptoms

The symptoms of seasonal affective disorder most often appear during the colder months of fall and winter. During these times there is less exposure to sunlight during the day. People who work for long periods of time inside of a building with few windows may experience the symptoms of SAD all year long. Some people may also experience changes in their mood during long periods of cloudy weather.

The symptoms of depression may be mild, moderate, or severe.

The emotional symptoms of SAD include:

- Sad, anxious or "empty" feelings
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness or helplessness
- Negative feelings about the future
- Irritability, restlessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities you used to enjoy



The physical symptoms of SAD include:

- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details and making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping or oversleeping
- Changes in weight
- Thoughts of death or suicide



People with SAD do not always have the same symptoms. They also do not always experience every symptom. A few people may experience SAD during the summer. In these cases the symptoms of depression often include anxiety or agitation, decreased appetite, weight loss and insomnia.

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## Causes

SAD is related to an imbalance of chemicals in the brain. It is brought on by shorter daylight hours and a lack of sunlight in the winter.

The changing of the seasons causes people to experience a shift in their biological internal clock. This throws off their daily schedule. Winter months seem to be the most difficult for people with SAD.

The change in behavior that people with SAD experience may be similar to the way animal behavior is affected by the seasons. Some animals become less active during the winter months. Hibernation is an example of a seasonal change in animal behavior.

SAD may also be caused by a hormone imbalance. Melatonin is a sleep-related hormone that has been associated with SAD. Melatonin is produced at increased levels in the dark, so more of it is produced during the winter months. Melatonin has been linked to depression.

Bright light affects brain chemistry, but to what extent is not known. Some researchers have suggested that the farther a person lives from the equator, the more likely they are to develop seasonal affective disorder.

The equator is an imaginary, horizontal line that divides the earth into two equal portions. It is an equal distance from the north and south poles. Countries located on the equator are typically warmer and have the same length of day throughout the year compared to other countries farther from the equator.

Equator



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## Risk Factors

Some factors put people at an increased risk of developing seasonal affective disorder. The following explains the risk factors commonly associated with SAD.

Women are more likely to be diagnosed with SAD than men. But men may have symptoms that are more severe than women.

People who live far from the equator have an increased risk for developing SAD. This could be caused by decreased sunlight in the winter months and longer days during the summer months.

People with a family history of other types of depression are more likely to develop SAD than people who do not have a blood relative with depression.

People who have been diagnosed with clinical depression or bipolar disorder are more likely to be affected by SAD than people with no previous diagnosis of depression. For these people, the symptoms of depression get worse during the fall and winter months.



## Diagnosis

If you experience feelings of depression, it is important to contact a healthcare provider. A proper evaluation of your symptoms is necessary. The healthcare provider will ask you specific questions about your symptoms. This helps him or her make an accurate diagnosis.

In addition to asking you detailed questions, your healthcare provider may request a physical examination and medical tests, including blood tests. This will help rule out any underlying problems that could be causing your depression.

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Seasonal affective disorder and other forms of depression can be confused with a more serious condition, like severe depression or bipolar disorder. A mental health professional is your best resource for diagnosing your symptoms and suggesting treatment options.

To help you prepare for an appointment, you can:

- Make a record of your symptoms
- Write down information about when your depression starts and what makes it worse or better
- Write down any other mental or physical health problems you have
- Prepare any questions you might have

You should also make a note of any major stressors or life changes you've experienced. Some examples of major stressors include the death of a loved one, financial problems, or problems related to your job.

Create a list of the medications you take, both prescription and over-the-counter. You should also inform the healthcare provider about any vitamins or supplements you are currently taking.



The following criteria must be met for a diagnosis of SAD:

- Symptoms have occurred for two consecutive years during the same season each year
- Depression goes away after a certain period of time
- No other cause for the change in mood or behavior can be found

Even when a thorough evaluation takes place, it may be difficult for your healthcare provider to diagnose seasonal affective disorder. This is because other types of depression or mental health conditions can cause symptoms similar to SAD.

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## Treatment

Light therapy is a common treatment for SAD. Light therapy is also known as phototherapy. Light therapy exposes a person to a very bright light. The light is usually provided by a special fluorescent lamp for 30 to 90 minutes a day during the winter months.

Nearly half of the people with SAD do not respond to light therapy alone. Antidepressant medication and talk therapy may help reduce the symptoms of SAD when light therapy alone fails. These treatments can be used alone or combined with light therapy.



Light Therapy

Talk therapy is sometimes known as psychotherapy. During talk therapy, a mental healthcare provider helps you learn about your moods, feelings, thoughts and behaviors.

The goal of therapy is to teach you how to take control of your thoughts and feelings and respond to life's challenges in a positive way.

Treatment can also come in the form of changes you make at home. Increasing your exposure to sunlight can improve the symptoms of SAD. A long walk outside or opening window blinds to allow more sunlight into your home or office could help. You could also arrange the rooms you are frequently in so that you are exposed to more sunlight during the day.

Regular exercise also helps relieve stress and feelings of anxiety. Getting into better shape can help you feel better about yourself, which may lessen your depression.

If you believe that the depression you are experiencing is severe, or if you are having suicidal thoughts, contact a healthcare provider immediately and discuss treatment options. You can also seek help at the nearest emergency room.



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Currently there are no known ways to prevent seasonal affective disorder. But taking steps to manage the symptoms of SAD may prevent them from getting worse over time.

Beginning treatment before the symptoms normally appear in the fall or winter and continuing the treatment past the time the symptoms normally go away may be helpful. People may be able to prevent serious changes in their energy levels and mood by taking control of their symptoms before they get worse.

## Summary

Seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, is a type of depression that some people experience during the winter months when there is less natural sunlight. Some people experience SAD during the spring and summer. Even fewer people experience symptoms during the winter and summer.

Some symptoms of SAD include sadness, anxiety, negative feelings about the future, and a loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities. People with SAD might also experience fatigue, difficulty concentrating and making decisions and changes in weight.

Increased exposure to sunlight can improve the symptoms of SAD. A long walk outside or rearranging rooms in such a way that there is more exposure to sunlight could help.

Light therapy may also be used to treat SAD. This therapy exposes a person to a very bright light for 30 to 90 minutes a day during the winter months. Some people also find relief by talking to a mental healthcare provider during talk therapy sessions. Antidepressants may also be helpful.



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