

## Seasonal Affective Disorder

During winter when the daylight hours are reduced, many of us feel a lowered mood, reduced energy levels and seem to need more sleep. Are you noticing this with yourself or a member of your family? Most of us adapt to seasonal changes well, however for some these changes are more profound and develop into an episode of wintertime depression that lessens and disappears during spring. This form of depression is called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Typical symptoms of depression such as loss of appetite and insomnia are not apparent with people with SAD and symptoms are more likely to be sleepiness, overeating with a focus on carbohydrates, a depressed mood, higher anxiety and lowered self-esteem. Energy levels and concentration are low, and this slowed thinking leads to poor functioning over the winter months. SAD is more common in women than men and onset typically occurs in young adulthood.

Anyone can get SAD, but it is more common in:

- People who live in areas where winter days are very short or there are big changes in the amount of daylight in different seasons
- Women
- People between the ages of 15 and 55. The risk of getting SAD for the first time goes down as you age
- People who have a close relative with SAD.

Experts are not sure what causes SAD, but it is likely that a lack of sunlight is largely responsible. The lack of light upsets the sleep-wake cycle and changes circadian rhythms (our internal 24 hour cycle) and it may cause problems with a brain chemical called serotonin that affects mood and the hormone melatonin that our bodies secrete at night.

What can help with SAD? There are some measures you can take on your own for you or your child that may help.

Make your environment sunnier and brighter. Open blinds, trim tree branches that block sunlight or add skylights to your home. Sit closer to bright windows while at home or in the office.

Increase the light through dawn simulation. For this treatment, a dim light goes on in the morning while you sleep, and it gets brighter over time, like a sunrise.

Get outside. Spending time outside is a natural form of treatment for SAD, even if the sun's not shining. A brisk morning walk within two hours of getting up is a good way to increase endorphins and lift your mood.

Exercise regularly. Physical exercise helps relieve stress and anxiety, both of which can increase seasonal affective disorder symptoms. Being more fit can make you feel better about yourself, too, which can lift your mood.

If you or someone in your family is you're feeling under the weather during winter, even with Australia's relatively mild climate, don't discount the weather.

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