

SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER (SAD)



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

A mood disorder that occurs during the winter months and stops when spring begins. Light plays a major part in its origin and in its treatment. It can affect both adults and children, and is more common in women. In rarer instances, the seasonal disorder symptoms occur in the summer months and may be caused by intolerance to heat.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Symptoms usually begin in September when days begin to shorten, and last through the winter into March when the days begin to get longer again.
- Depression.
- Feeling tired, sluggish, and needing more sleep.
- Increased appetite (especially for carbohydrates).
- Weight gain.
- Irritability and feeling less cheerful.
- Being less social.
- Decreased interest in sex and physical contact.
- Joint aches, stomach problems, and more infections.

CAUSES

It is thought that the lack of bright light in winter months causes changes in the brain chemistry. Melatonin, a substance produced at night by the pineal gland, normally helps with sleep. When too much melatonin is produced due to longer nights, it can cause symptoms of depression.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- The area of the country where a person lives. People in northern latitudes are more susceptible to SAD.
- Other depressive illness.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

No measures are known to prevent the disorder.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

With correct diagnosis and treatment, symptoms can be helped.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Problems in coping with life as a result of the symptoms.



DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Your health care provider will do a physical exam and ask questions about your symptoms and activities. Diagnosing SAD can be difficult.

The same symptoms can arise from other types of depression. Blood tests may be done to rule out other medical disorders. Diagnosis usually requires a three-year pattern of mood changes that begin in the autumn and stop in the spring.

- Mild symptoms may be helped with simple measures. Keep drapes and blinds open in your house and sit near windows and gaze outside often. Turn on bright lights on cloudy days. Keep a diary or journal of your mood changes so that any changes or patterns can be tracked. Stay social, visit friends, and stay busy with activities.

- Treatment may involve light therapy (phototherapy). Duration and intensities of this therapy will vary for each person. It is recommended that light therapy not be used without medical advice. Examples include:

- Sitting in a very bright light (equal to 10 or more 100-watt bulbs) for a period in the morning and, sometimes, in the evening. The term lux (Latin for light) is the unit of measure for the light therapy.

- Installing a computerized system of lighting in a patient's bedroom that creates an artificial dawn. The light goes from very dim to bright like a sunrise.

- Other forms of treatment include drugs or counseling to help the person cope with the symptoms.

- To learn more: National Organization for Seasonal Affective Disorder, P.O. Box 40133, Washington, DC 20016; website: www.nosad.org.

MEDICATION

Antidepressants may be prescribed.

ACTIVITY

- Stay as active as your energy permits. Physical activity is almost always good for mood disorders.
- Get outside as much as possible, especially in the early morning light.
- Take vacations in the winter months.

DIET

Eat a normal well-balanced diet to maintain good health.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of seasonal affective disorder.
- Symptoms continue or worsen, despite treatment.

Special notes:

More notes on the back of this page