

Winter blues: Managing seasonal sadness



As we head into winter, many people are ready to cozy up and be charmed by the comforts of colder weather. Others feel a significant sadness. If you feel down and isolated around the same time every year—with an urge to hibernate—seasonal affective disorder (SAD) may be to blame.

SAD is a seasonal depression that occurs in the late fall and winter and impacts around 5% of adults in the U.S.^{1,2}



What are the signs of SAD?

SAD is a type of depression that some people experience during months with less sunlight. Many symptoms of SAD are the same as regular depressive symptoms.³ They just occur in a seasonal pattern. These include:³

- Feeling hopeless, helpless, “empty” or worthless
- Low energy, fatigue or feeling “slowed down”
- Loss of interest in hobbies or fun activities
- Sleeping problems (unable to fall or stay asleep, oversleeping)
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Feeling irritable, frustrated or restless
- Thoughts of death or suicide²

Winter depression, or SAD, can also include symptoms such as:²

- Feeling tired even with increased sleep hours
- Feeling sad or guilty
- Weight or appetite changes, overeating, carbohydrate cravings
- Inability to sit still
- Social withdrawal



Risk factors

While SAD can affect anyone, some people are more likely than others to experience seasonal depression, including:

- **People with a personal or family history of depression.** History is an important indicator of seasonal depression. If someone in your immediate family has these downward patterns, you may be more likely to develop SAD yourself.
- **Women.** Women are diagnosed with SAD more often than men.²
- **Younger adults.** Usually, SAD first begins in young adults between 18 and 30 years old.²
- **People who live in a colder climate far from the equator.** Symptoms usually occur when and where there are fewer than 12 hours of available daylight.
- **People with low self-esteem.** Pessimistic personalities, people who tend to become overwhelmed by stress and those affected by abuse or poverty can be more vulnerable to bouts of depression.¹



Can you prevent SAD?

Seasonal affective disorder may not be able to be prevented. But there are things you can do each year to ensure you're in the best place heading into the months with less daylight.

- **Get outside.** Whether you're being active or just enjoying the sun, being outside during daylight hours is one of the best ways to nourish both your mind and body. Even sitting next to a window at work can help if you're not getting enough sunlight.
- **Eat well.** Speaking of nourishment, eating a healthy diet—lean protein, fruits and vegetables, whole grains and less sugar and processed foods—goes a long way. There's a strong link between food and mood.
- **Focus on self-care activities.** Carving out time for yourself and doing things you enjoy is key.
- **Spend time with friends and family.** Make plans and stay connected to your community as much as possible.



Managing SAD

SAD can last about four to five months before improving with the return of spring. Treatments are available through mental health professionals that can improve symptoms and help you enjoy life.¹

Often, several treatments are used together. These may include:²

- **Light therapy.** Since wintertime SAD rears its ugly head when we have fewer daylight hours, experts believe that symptoms improve with exposure to therapeutic light. If spending more time outdoors is not effective or possible, light therapy may be prescribed.
- **Talk therapy.** Speaking with a therapist trained in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can help you rework negative thoughts and behaviors into more positive ones.
- **Medication or supplements.** For people who often experience SAD, certain antidepressants and/or vitamin and mineral supplements may help. You'll need to talk to a psychiatrist about what may be right for you.

Undiagnosed, untreated or uncontrolled medical conditions can lead to similar symptoms, so thorough evaluation by a medical professional is key to ensure you receive the best care and the right treatment options.^{1,2}

Being proactive and taking care of yourself as you head into the winter season can help keep the winter blues at bay.

¹<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/depression/what-is-depression>

²<https://www.psychiatry.org/Patients-Families/Seasonal-Affective-Disorder>

³<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression>

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