



Developing a Better Understanding

SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

Many people go through short periods when they feel sad or unlike their usual selves. Sometimes, these mood changes begin and end when the seasons change. Many people feel “down” or have the “winter blues” when the days get shorter in the fall and winter and feel better in the spring when longer daylight hours return.

Sometimes, these mood changes are more serious and can affect how a person feels, thinks, and behaves. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that comes and goes with the seasons. It usually starts in the late fall and early winter and goes away during the spring and summer. Some people do have episodes of depression that start in the spring or summer, but that is a lot less common.

What are the signs and symptoms of SAD?

According to the National Institute on Mental Health, SAD is a type of depression characterized by a recurrent seasonal pattern, with symptoms lasting about 4–5 months out of the year. The signs and symptoms of SAD include those associated with depression as well as disorder-specific symptoms that differ for winter-pattern versus summer-pattern SAD. Not every person with SAD experiences all the symptoms listed below.

Symptoms of depression can include:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood most of the day, nearly every day, for at least 2 weeks
- Feelings of hopelessness or pessimism
- Feelings of irritability, frustration, or restlessness
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
- Decreased energy, fatigue, or feeling slowed down
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Changes in sleep or appetite or unplanned weight changes
- Physical aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not have a clear physical cause and do not go away with treatment
- Thoughts of death or suicide or suicide attempts

For winter-pattern SAD, additional symptoms can include:

- Oversleeping (hypersomnia)
- Overeating, particularly with a craving for carbohydrates, leading to weight gain
- Social withdrawal (feeling like “hibernating”)

Winter-pattern SAD should not be confused with “holiday blues”—feelings of sadness or anxiety brought on by stresses at certain times of the year. The depression associated with SAD is related to changes in daylight hours, not the calendar, so stresses associated with the holidays or predictable seasonal changes in work or school schedules, family visits, and so forth are not the same as SAD.

MedlinePlus reports that SAD is more common in women, young people, and those who live far from the equator. A person is also more likely to have SAD if they or their family members have depression. The exact causes of SAD are unknown. Researchers have found that people with SAD may have an imbalance of serotonin, a brain chemical that affects mood. Their bodies also make too much melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep, and not enough vitamin D.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD): More Than the Winter Blues

As the days get shorter and there is less daylight, you may start to feel sad. While many people experience the “winter blues,” some people may have a type of depression called seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

The first step is to determine how much your symptoms interfere with your daily life.

Do you have mild symptoms that have lasted less than 2 weeks?



- Feeling down but still able to take care of yourself and others
- Having some trouble sleeping
- Having less energy than usual but still able to do your job, schoolwork, or housework

These activities can make you feel better:



- Doing something you enjoy
- Going outside in the sunlight
- Spending time with family and friends
- Eating healthy and avoiding foods with lots of sugar

If these activities do not help or your symptoms are getting worse, talk to a health care provider.

Do you have more severe symptoms that have lasted more than 2 weeks?



- Social withdrawal
- Oversleeping
- Gaining weight
- Craving foods with lots of sugar like cakes, candies, and cookies

Seek professional help:



- Light therapy
- Psychotherapy (talk therapy)
- Medications
- Vitamin D supplements

For help finding treatment, visit nimh.nih.gov/findhelp.

If you or someone you know is in immediate distress or is thinking about hurting themselves, call or text the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at **988** or chat at 988lifeline.org.



National Institute
of Mental Health

nimh.nih.gov/sad

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Can SAD be prevented?

Because the onset of SAD is so predictable, people with a history of the disorder might benefit from starting the treatments mentioned above before the fall (for winter-pattern SAD) or spring (for summer-pattern SAD) to help prevent or reduce depression symptoms. To date, few studies have investigated whether SAD can be prevented.

It is helpful to discuss a personalized treatment plan with a health care provider. A provider can help decide not only the best treatment option but the best timing to help prevent SAD depressive episodes.