

**Title:** Treatment of Seasonal Affective Disorder

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**Plain Language Summary:**

**What is Seasonal affective disorder?**

Seasonal affective disorder (also called SAD) is a type of disorder where a person experiences a change in overall mood that starts at the same time every year. For most people with SAD, you notice symptoms in the fall that may continue into the winter months. SAD is different from other forms of depression because people with SAD have normal moods throughout the rest of the year.

**What causes SAD?**

The direct cause of seasonal affective disorder is not yet known. Age, genetics, other medical conditions and the natural physiology of the body can all be variables in the development of seasonal affective disorder. Some important variables affected with treatment include:

**Your biological clock (circadian rhythm):** During the fall and winter months, there is less sunlight, which can disrupt your body's internal clock, which helps you know when you should be asleep or awake. This disruption can sometimes cause feelings of depression.

**Serotonin levels.** Decreased levels of serotonin, a brain chemical (neurotransmitter) that affects mood, can play a role in seasonal affective disorder. A reduction in sunlight can cause a decrease in serotonin, which may cause depression.

**Melatonin levels.** The change in season can disrupt the balance of the natural hormone melatonin, which plays a role in mood and sleep patterns.

**Do I have SAD?**

For most people, seasonal affective disorder symptoms occur during late fall or early winter and eventually goes away once the days become sunnier in spring or summer. Symptoms initially start mild and become more severe as the season progresses.

Winter-onset seasonal affective disorder symptoms include:

Depression

Presence of headaches

Loss of energy

Loss of interest in social activities

Drastic mood swings

Oversleeping

Loss of interest in enjoyable activities

Appetite changes, especially craving for foods high in carbohydrates

Weight gain

Difficulty concentrating

**Is there a test I can take?**

At this time, there is no specific test for SAD. If you visit your healthcare provider, they may make the diagnosis based on your history of symptoms. It is common to receive a physical examination and blood tests to rule out other disorders that may have symptoms similar to SAD.

**When should I see a doctor?**

For most people, it is normal to have some days of feeling down. However, if these feelings last for several days and you notice decreased motivation or not being able to enjoy activities that you usually enjoy, you should see your doctor. If you notice a major change in your sleep pattern, changes in appetite, feelings of hopelessness, start turning to alcohol for relaxation or start thinking about suicide; it is very important for you to see your doctor.

**What are my treatment options?**

The first line treatment for SAD is light therapy (phototherapy). Light therapy involves having a small box that mimics outdoor light and has been shown to be effective with the few side effects. Additional treatment for SAD includes medication and counseling. Before you start any treatment, it is important for you to discuss what treatment options will work best for you with your healthcare provider.

**Additional Resources:**

Medline-plus

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/seasonalaffecteddisorder.html>

The Center for Environmental Therapeutics on-line questionnaire on its website

<http://www.cet.org/>

NAMI, National Alliance on Mental Health

[http://www.nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/Helpline1/Seasonal\\_Affective\\_Disorder\\_%28SAD%29.htm](http://www.nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/Helpline1/Seasonal_Affective_Disorder_%28SAD%29.htm)

**Key Words:**

Seasonal affective Disorder

Phototherapy

Circadian rhythm

Melatonin

Major depressive disorder

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