

## SEASONAL DEPRESSION (SAD) IS NOT JUST THE “WINTER BLUES”

As the days shorten and the weather gets colder, many people find their mood decreases along with the amount of daylight. If you find yourself depressed or more depressed than usual during the fall and winter months, you may be suffering from a type of depression known as seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

### SYMPTOMS OF SAD

The primary [characteristic of SAD](#) is that it occurs during the fall and winter months when the days are shorter. This happens because a person is exposed to less natural light, with several consequences.

Other [common symptoms](#) of seasonal depression include:

- Increased fatigue
- Lethargy and disinterest in social activities
- Increased appetite, especially for carbohydrate-rich foods
- Weight gain
- Feeling “heavy”
- Sleeping more
- Inability to concentrate

### WHAT CAUSES SEASONAL DEPRESSION?

Decreased exposure to natural light (sunlight) is thought to cause an imbalance in brain chemistry that triggers SAD.

One reason for seasonal depression symptoms [is sunlight is necessary to produce vitamin D](#) in the body. Low levels of vitamin D are associated with depression and fatigue. In addition, shorter days cause a [disruption in the sleep-wake cycle](#) because darkness stimulates production of the hormone [melatonin](#). Melatonin is related to sleep, so when production increases, a person feels tired and lethargic.

Lack of sunlight also interferes with the body’s circadian rhythms, which tell you when to sleep and when to be awake and alert. Darkness affects levels of the neurotransmitter [serotonin](#) too. Depleted serotonin levels are linked with all forms of depression.

### WHO DEVELOPS SEASONAL DEPRESSION?

Anyone can feel more depressed in the autumn and winter, but you are [more likely to develop SAD](#) if you

- live farther from the equator.
- have a history of clinical depression, bipolar disorder, or an anxiety disorder.
- work indoors in a room without windows.

- are a woman.
- have low levels of vitamin D.

## **WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT MILD TO MODERATE SEASONAL DEPRESSION?**

There are many things you can do on your own to ease symptoms of SAD. However, if your symptoms are severe and you find they significantly interfere with your life, you may want to see your doctor.

In the meantime, here are some things you can try:

### **Brighten your surroundings**

Do as much as possible to let sunlight into your home or office. Keep blinds open and try to sit near windows, for example. If tree branches are blocking sunlight, trim them back so the light can come in. You may even want to add skylights to your home if SAD is an ongoing issue for you.

You can brighten the surroundings inside your home or office as well. Try wearing “sunny” colors and surrounding yourself with colorful flowers or plants. Colorful paintings or fun decorations can brighten things up as well.

### **Get out of the house**

While it’s usually easy to be outdoors in the spring and summer, you’ll probably have to make a conscious effort to get outside in the autumn and winter. Even though it’s colder out, getting out into natural sunlight will make a difference, so spend as much time as possible outside, especially on sunny days. Take short walks, or if the weather is mild enough, eat lunch in the park. Run your errands in places that force you to be outdoors instead of inside malls, and walk to errands that are close by if you can.

### **Exercise**

Regular exercise is important for two reasons if you suffer from seasonal depression disorder. First, it helps counteract the tendency to gain weight, and second, it will help increase your energy and boost your mood.

Any kind of exercise is better than none, so don’t think you have to run marathons or do intense workouts at the gym. Try a brisk walk or a yoga class or some simple stretching and strength training. The important thing is to move, even though your body will resist. Exercising for as few as twenty minutes once or twice a day will help reduce the symptoms of seasonal depression disorder.

### **Nutritional remedies**

Certain nutritional remedies, such as St. John’s Wort and omega-3 fatty acids, may positively affect symptoms of depression.

[St. John's Wort](#) is an herb long used to treat mild to moderate depression and other disorders. [Omega-3 fatty acids](#) are the healthy fats found in fish such as salmon, sardines, mackerel, and herring. It is also found in some nuts and grains, and you can buy fish oil or omega-3 capsules in supplement form. Omega-3 fatty acids are important for the brain to function well, and some studies associate diets high in omega-3 with fewer symptoms of depression.

### **Mind-body treatments**

Some holistic approaches to wellness offer promising results for people who experience seasonal affective disorder. Treatments that target overall physical and mental wellbeing, include

- acupuncture
- massage
- meditation
- yoga or tai chi
- hypnosis/guided imagery

### **Be around people**

Socializing can be challenging for anyone with depression, but if you find yourself withdrawing from all social activities due to SAD, consider finding time to connect with others once in a while. Social connections offer the opportunity to take your mind off your depression and can also give you the support system you need to cope with your symptoms.

Try scheduling one social activity each week. It can be as simple as meeting a neighbor for a cup of tea or seeing a movie with a friend. Go to the gym or find a community event to attend. Make it fun and even try something new. For example, take a class at a local craft store or join a book club.

### **Light therapy**

You can buy special fluorescent lamps to treat SAD. The treatment, known as phototherapy, usually involves about 30 to 90 minutes of daily exposure to the very bright light emitted from the lamp. Since you need to have a [specific kind of lamp or light box](#) for light therapy to work, you may need to do some research or consult your doctor for help choosing a light therapy product.

### **WHEN SHOULD YOU SEE A DOCTOR FOR SEASONAL DEPRESSION?**

In many cases, you can manage seasonal depression symptoms on your own. However, consult a doctor and seek professional help if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- Complete social withdrawal
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Inability to function at work or in school

- Alcohol or drug abuse

In severe cases, a short course of psychotherapy or prescription medication may be necessary to keep the symptoms from getting out of control and turning into full blown clinical depression. SAD is treated with the same medications used for clinical depression in other forms.