

## *Seasonal Depression, or Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)*

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that's related to changes in seasons — SAD begins and ends at about the same times every year. If you're like most people with SAD, your symptoms start in the fall and continue into the winter months, sapping your energy and making you feel moody. These symptoms often resolve during the spring and summer months. Less often, SAD causes depression in the spring or early summer and resolves during the fall or winter months.

Don't brush off that yearly feeling as simply a case of the "winter blues" or a seasonal funk that you have to tough out on your own. Take steps to keep your mood and motivation steady throughout the year.

The worst months are typically: January and February, when daylight is at its lowest, though symptoms often start building in November and can linger into early spring. These winter months mark the peak severity for many, with symptoms improving as days lengthen in spring.

### **Common Symptoms**

- Feeling listless, sad or down most of the day, nearly every day
- Losing interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Low energy or fatigue.
- Oversleeping or difficulty sleeping.
- Increased appetite, especially for carbs, leading to weight gain.
- Irritability or restlessness.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Feeling hopeless, worthless or guilty
- Thoughts of death or suicide (seek immediate help).

## Causes & Risk Factors

- **Reduced Sunlight:** Less sunlight affects serotonin levels and melatonin (sleep hormone).
- **Biological Clock:** Changes in daylight can disrupt your internal body clock (circadian rhythm).
- **Location:** More common in areas farther from the equator with shorter winter days.
- **Demographics:** More prevalent in women and younger adults.

## Treatments & Self-Care

- **Light Therapy (Phototherapy):** Using a special light box.
- **Psychotherapy (Talk Therapy):** Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is effective.
- **Medication:** Antidepressants may be prescribed.
- **Lifestyle:** Get regular exercise, maintain consistent sleep, go outdoors, and eat well.

## When to Seek Help

- Don't dismiss it as "winter blues"; symptoms are overwhelming and disrupt daily life.
- ***If experiencing suicidal thoughts, call or text 988 in the US and Canada.***
- Contact a doctor or mental health professional for diagnosis and treatment.

## Seasonal changes and bipolar disorder

People who have bipolar disorder are at increased risk of seasonal affective disorder. In some people with bipolar disorder, episodes of mania may be linked to a specific season. For example, spring and summer can bring on symptoms of mania or a less intense form of mania (hypomania), anxiety, agitation and irritability. They may also experience depression during the fall and winter months.

## When to see a doctor

It's normal to have some days when you feel down. But if you feel down for days at a time and you can't get motivated to do activities you normally enjoy, see your health care provider. This is especially important if your sleep patterns and appetite have changed, you turn to alcohol for comfort or relaxation, or you feel hopeless or think about suicide.