

Spring fever blossoms in warm weather -- but is it a real ailment?

April 22 2010, by Sara Peach

(PhysOrg.com) -- Two University of North Carolina medical professionals explain the 'spring fever' phenomenon and how seasons affect our mood.

In the season of ducklings, blooming dogwoods and open-toed sandals, some people are struck with a mysterious malady - spring fever.

Purported symptoms include daydreaming, falling in love and having the irrepressible urge to stay outside all day. There is no cure, though some treat the disease by canceling appointments and lying in the grass beneath the drifting clouds.

Elvis caught it. So did the poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Mark Twain's character Huckleberry Finn.

“It's spring fever,” Finn exclaims in Tom Sawyer, Detective. “And when you've got it, you want - oh, you don't quite know what it is you do want, but it just fairly makes your heart ache, you want it so!”

But is spring fever a real phenomenon?

“It depends on what you mean by 'real,’” said Dr. Jon Abramowitz, professor and associate chair of psychology at the University of North Carolina. It's not an official medical condition, he said.

“When the weather turns warm, people are definitely tired of being

cooped up, and they get excited about the warm weather and getting to do stuff outside,” he said.

That excitement may trigger the brain to secrete endorphins, pain-relieving chemicals that suffuse a person with feelings of well-being. Endorphins chemically resemble morphine, the narcotic derived from poppies.

Spring activities, such as flying a kite or taking a leisurely bike ride, may also play a role because exercising can improve mood.

“Exercise is just as good as antidepressants for depression,” Abramowitz said.

Frisky feelings could also result from getting more sunlight, said Dr. Thomas Koonce, associate medical director at the UNC Family Medicine Center.

“It may be that spring fever is actually a resolution of the blues we get during the winter,” he said.

Variations in day length are associated with changes in levels of melatonin, a neurotransmitter involved in the regulation of sleep. Melatonin also plays a role in depression.

“We know from studies of big populations of people that the incidence of depression goes up in the fall and winter,” Koonce said. “And we think that that's affected mostly by decreased sunlight hours.”

Koonce said that winter depression, sometimes diagnosed as seasonal affective disorder, is most likely to affect young women and people who have moved from sunny climates to darker, cloudier regions.

But what about spring fever's link to love? After all, Tennyson said that it is in the spring that “a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.”

Koonce said there is little evidence that spring turns people to romance.

But he said that as warm weather returns, “People feel better. They have more energy. That would make them prone to a relationship.”

Several studies have found seasonal variation in sperm counts, with the lowest sperm concentrations occurring during the hot summer months.

Other research suggests that in the United States, there is a small peak in births in February and March, indicating conception the previous spring. But more babies are born in August and September, and they would have been conceived in the darkness of winter.

SPRING HEALTH TIPS

- [Warm weather](#) is a great incentive to exercise outdoors, Koonce said. “Twenty to forty minutes of exercise most days of the week is a terrific baseline,” he said.
- But as you spend more time outside, make sure to stay well-hydrated. To reduce your exposure to pollen, which can affect people with allergies and asthma, exercise in the early morning. “Plants open up and flower as the sun comes up,” Koonce said.
- Resume outdoor exercise gradually to avoid injury.
- Take steps to avoid too much sun, which can lead to skin cancer. To reduce your risk, try wearing protective clothing and staying indoors during the brightest part of the day. “We must be very careful to protect

ourselves from harmful sun exposure,” Koonce said.

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