

# Shorter days triggering seasonal affective disorder

November 8 2017, by Jim Ritter

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Credit: Loyola University

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression triggered by shorter days and reduced light.

"We are in the midst of the full-blown SAD season," said said Loyola

Medicine psychiatrist Angelos Halaris, MD, PhD.

Seasonal affective disorder affects between three and five percent of the population. SAD is thought to be related to a chemical imbalance in the brain, brought on by lack of [light](#) due to shorter days and overcast skies.

SAD causes depression, [excessive sleepiness](#), lack of interest, reduced motivation and fatigue, making it difficult to get up in the morning. In the most severe cases, people can stay in bed all day, or even attempt suicide. The season lasts until mid-April.

"Seasonal affective disorder should not be taken lightly," Dr. Halaris said.

Dr. Halaris said four strategies can help:

- **Sunshine.** If possible, spend at least 30 minutes a day outside. Don't wear sunglasses. And if it's not too cold, roll up your sleeves – exposing your skin to sunlight helps relieve symptoms of SAD.
- **Lights.** Your home and work should be as well-lit as possible. Open drapes and blinds to let in natural light. In addition, purchase a high-intensity light box designed for SAD therapy. Sit close to the box for 30 to 45 minutes in the morning and 30 to 45 minutes in the evening. Although you can do light therapy on your own, it's best to consult a [mental health](#) professional.
- **Exercise.** Exercise for at least 30 minutes a day. Exercise releases endorphins and other brain chemicals that create a sense of well-being and make you feel more energized.
- **Medications.** If sunshine, lights and [exercise](#) aren't enough to ward off SAD, see a mental health professional. Two classes of anti-depressant medications are effective against SAD: monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs) and selective

serotonin/norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs and SNRIs).

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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