

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD): What it is, symptoms and treatments

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Ever heard of the winter blues? This common phrase is used to describe

that blah feeling that strikes during winter months when the weather is cold and the sky is gray in many parts of the country.

The reality is, the [winter blues](#) is a form of [depression](#).

"When there is a shift in the season and our access to daylight, our bodies struggle to adjust to the new light and time frame," Susan Albers, a psychologist at the Cleveland Clinic, explains in an [online video](#). This phenomenon is referred to as seasonal depression.

What is seasonal depression?

This type of depression is also known as seasonal affective disorder or SAD. The [U.S. National Institute of Mental Health](#) (NIMH) describes SAD as "changes in your mood and behavior whenever the seasons change."

Feeling hopeless, helpless or irritable are all signs of depression. When those emotions occur seasonally and last for several months, it could be SAD.

Contrary to what you may think about seasonal affective disorder, it can strike at any time of the year, not just in the [winter](#). In fact, there are two types of SAD.

Fall-onset SAD or winter depression usually begins in the fall or early winter and symptoms ease in the summer.

Symptoms of spring-onset SAD or summer depression begin in the late spring or early summer. Summer depression is far less common than winter depression.

Seasonal depression causes and risk factors

Research suggests two brain chemicals—serotonin and melatonin—may explain the cause of seasonal affective disorder, according to the [NIMH](#).

Serotonin is a mood-regulating chemical, and reduced sunlight is believed to impact serotonin levels in the brain. During the winter, when there is less sunlight, serotonin levels drop.

Melatonin regulates your sleep-wake cycle. Medical experts suspect people with SAD produce too much melatonin, causing them to sleep more.

Both chemicals are responsible for maintaining your body's night-day cycle. Experts at NIMH explain it this way: "In people with SAD, the changes in serotonin and melatonin levels disrupt the normal daily rhythms. As a result, they can no longer adjust to the seasonal changes in day length, leading to sleep, mood and behavior changes."

Seasonal affective disorder affects about 5% of U.S. adults. It's more common in women than men, though researchers aren't sure why, according to the [Cleveland Clinic](#). Symptoms often begin in young adulthood, between 18 and 30 years of age.

People with depression, bipolar disorder or a family history of major depression or other mental health conditions are at a greater risk for developing SAD.

Not surprisingly, you are more likely to have fall-onset SAD if you live in the northern part of the country where daylight hours are shorter in the winter months.

Seasonal depression symptoms

Seasonal affective disorder and depression share similar symptoms. According to [Cleveland Clinic](#), these include:

- Overwhelming sadness
- Hopelessness
- Anxiety
- Lack of energy or extreme fatigue
- Loss of interest in activities usually found to be enjoyable
- Social isolation
- Carbohydrate cravings
- Fluctuation in weight (gain or loss)
- Sleep disturbances
- Poor concentration
- Agitation
- Thoughts of death or suicide.

Seasonal depression treatments

If you're wondering how to combat seasonal depression, experts at the [Mayo Clinic](#) point to several treatment options.

Light therapy: Exposure to [bright light](#) is a well-known and effective treatment for people who suffer from SAD. In a [video](#), Mayo Clinic psychologist Craig Sawchuck calls [light therapy](#) "one of the most effective treatments for [seasonal affective disorder](#)." He recommends sitting in front of a 10,000-lux light box or lamp for about 20 minutes first thing in the morning every day.

Psychotherapy: Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), or talk therapy, can help you cope with difficult circumstances. The focus of CBT is to identify and change negative thought patterns and behaviors and improve

coping strategies. This includes learning healthy behaviors to replace unhealthy behaviors.

Medications: For some, antidepressants can be effective in treating seasonal depression. One extended-release antidepressant approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for treatment of [seasonal depression](#) is bupropion (Wellbutrin XL, Aplenzin). Starting treatment with bupropion prior to the time of year your symptoms typically begin can help with symptom relief, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Additional suggestions recommended by [Mayo Clinic](#) include:

- Increasing movement and exercise
- Boosting exposure to sunlight (indoor or outdoor) whenever possible
- Spending time outside
- Improving sleep habits.

Seasonal depression is more common than you might think. But, regardless of the time of year, it's wise to check in with your [health care provider](#) if you experience feelings of depression for an extended period. Help is available. Talk to your provider about your symptoms and treatment options.

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