

# Q&A: Health experts cover winter's myriad health challenges

February 15 2024, by Courtney Perrett

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We know you're thinking about it: Turning the corner from winter into spring. Although warmer days are on the horizon, the effects of weeks of gray, winter days are real. For some, winter weather comes with a

particular dose of biological adversity: seasonal affective disorder, appropriately known as SAD. Follow along for a Q&A with University of Missouri psychiatrist Arpit Aggarwal to learn what SAD is and how to combat its symptoms. He also provides tools and techniques to give your mental health a boost to conquer the last remnants of the dark season.

## **What is seasonal affective disorder?**

It is a type of mood disorder. The defining characteristic is that it starts and ends at comparatively the same time of the year. For example, the most common pattern would be [depressive symptoms](#) starting in the fall, getting progressively worse in the winter and then improving in the spring.

## **What's the difference between winter blues and SAD?**

The main difference is the level of impairment or distress that a person is experiencing. Often, feelings of [winter blues](#) should go away in a few days, or at most, two weeks. But once a person starts not being able to go to work, experiencing interpersonal problems in their relationships, having [social problems](#) or feeling significantly distressed for an extended period, that's when it is a possible seasonal affective disorder diagnosis.

## **What are the symptoms of SAD?**

The symptoms are pretty similar to any other type of depression. It starts with feelings of sadness, irritability, boredom, lack of energy, changes in sleep patterns, changes in appetite and concentration. Another major symptom is what we term "anhedonia," which means that a person is no longer finding joy in activities that once brought them joy. This is common in cases of SAD.

## How is SAD treated?

If you think you are experiencing seasonal affective disorder, I recommend you reach out to your doctor. For SAD, a special kind of light therapy is recommended that's really valid for this kind of depression. And that's partly because one of the reasons that physicians think causes seasonal affective disorder is the lack of sunlight. The theory behind that is that as you go farther away from the equator, there's a lack of exposure of sunlight, especially in wintertime. In severe cases, medication and cognitive behavior therapy are also options for treatment.

## Who is the most vulnerable to SAD?

People with a past history of depression or bipolar disorder or a strong family history of depression are most at risk for [seasonal affective disorder](#). There's also a theory that people who live further from the equator and have fewer hours of sunlight every winter are more susceptible to SAD too.

## Don't veto vitamin D

While the winter blues can deliver a serious blow to a person's mood, there are ways to combat its effects. One solution is in what we eat. MU nutritionist Jennifer Bean, an associate professor in the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources, says one way is through food choices and including more vitamin D in your diet. This vitamin is linked with supporting good [mental health](#). In the winter when sunlight is limited, so vitamin D made from the sun is limited. Bean suggests eating foods that are high in vitamin D make up the difference and combat insufficiency—something that affects approximately 41% of Americans, according to The National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys,

[published](#) in *Frontiers in Nutrition*.

To keep healthy during the wintertime, Bean suggests choosing a variety of foods to obtain nutrients often missed in American diets. Here are five foods to pick:

- Popcorn: As a [whole grain](#), plain popcorn makes for a great snack. Explore some healthy dressings that traverse flavor profiles, including a sprinkle of parmesan cheese, [olive oil](#) and [black pepper](#) or a drizzle of warm honey.
- Seasonal vegetables: During winter, root vegetables are readily available in grocery stores. Try out a hearty stew with a combination of colorful vegetables including carrots, onions and potatoes.
- Fruits: Most fruits aren't in season during winter, but a little-known fact is that there's no nutritional difference between frozen and fresh fruits. Head over to the freezer and pick up a bag of frozen strawberries (or whatever you fancy) to enjoy.
- Milk: Drinking milk that is fortified with Vitamin D is another way to increase Vitamin D consumption. In addition to cow's milk, other options include almond milk and soy milk, which both can be good sources of protein.
- Chocolate: Eating well also means treating yourself. Dark chocolate contains high levels of cacao and can help protect against disease.

Provided by University of Missouri

Citation: Q&A: Health experts cover winter's myriad health challenges (2024, February 15) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-02-qa-health-experts-winter-myriad.html>

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