



Note from



the Navigator

WHAT IS SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER (SAD)?

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that occurs in relation to the seasons, most commonly beginning in winter. The depression generally lifts during spring and summer. For some people, the change in the seasons brings with it something more serious than the blues: seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a form of depression that can be debilitating. Mild forms of SAD are believed to affect as many as 20% of people in the United States.

What Are the Symptoms?

- 1. Depression.** SAD is a form of depression and it shares most of the same symptoms: hopelessness, despair, guilt, loss of self-esteem and apathy. If you feel this way only during the fall and winter, and if these symptoms disappear during the rest of the year, it may be a sign of SAD.
- 2. Anxiety.** Tension and inability to tolerate stress.
- 3. Mood Changes.** Extremes of mood and, in some individuals, periods of mania in spring and summer.
- 4. Sleepiness and fatigue.** People with SAD tend to feel the need to sleep more during the wintertime - sometimes a lot more. They also experience more insomnia and sleep disturbances, and are more prone to nodding off at work. They often feel fatigued and unable to perform their daily routine.
- 5. Irritability.** Anger and irritability are common symptoms of depression and SAD. Research suggests that people with SAD are significantly more irritable than healthy individuals. They may also be more prone to anger than people with regular (nonseasonal) depression.
- 6. Carb Cravings/Increased Appetite.** This disorder can produce a strong craving for complex carbohydrates such as bread and pasta. (In fact, 7 out of 10 people with SAD experience this symptom.) Gorging on carbohydrates causes the levels of an amino acid called tryptophan to rise in the brain. This in turn causes the release of serotonin, which boosts mood. In effect, people with SAD use carbohydrates as a kind of medication - and a bigger waistline is a common side effect. As with depression in general, SAD can increase appetite in some people. Sixty-five percent of people with the disorder report being hungrier during the colder, darker months. The voracious appetite that sometimes accompanies SAD may be a biological response to a seasonal drop in serotonin, a neurotransmitter that's associated with mood and helps to control hunger. Though it can help you feel better temporarily, eating more - and being cooped up - during the winter can really pack on the pounds: nearly 75% of people with SAD gain weight.
- 7. Loss of interest in formerly enjoyed activities.** Depression doesn't exactly make you feel sexy. A loss of interest in sex is a common symptom among people with SAD and depression alike. But this only tends to be true among people who experience SAD in the fall and winter. If the disorder appears in the spring and summer - a much rarer condition sometimes called "summer depression" or "reverse SAD" - some of the symptoms tend to be the opposite of winter SAD. And one of the hallmarks of summer depression is an *increased* sex drive.

What Causes SAD?

The cause of SAD is not known, but it is thought to be related to numerous factors, including: ambient light, body temperature and hormone regulation. The disorder may begin in adolescence or early adulthood. Like other forms of depression, it occurs more frequently in women than in men. Most people with the "winter blahs" or "cabin fever" do not have SAD.

How Is It Treated?

As with other types of depression, anti-depressant medications and talk therapy can be effective. Light therapy using a special lamp to mimic light from the sun may also be helpful. Symptoms commonly get better on their own with the change of seasons.

[The information contained in this Navigator Note was provided by Medline Plus, a service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health. For further information visit their website: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/seasonalaffectivedisorder.html.]