

## Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that's triggered by a change in seasons, usually when fall starts. This seasonal depression gets worse in the late fall or early winter before ending in the sunnier days of spring.

You can also get a mild version of SAD known as the "winter blues." It's normal to feel a little down during colder months as it gets dark early, and you may be feeling stuck inside.

### What causes seasonal affective disorder (SAD)?

Researchers don't know exactly what causes seasonal depression. Lack of sunlight may trigger the condition.

The theories suggest:

- **Biological clock change:** When there's less sunlight, your biological clock shifts. This internal clock regulates your mood, sleep, and hormones. When it shifts, you're out of step with the daily schedule you've been used to and can't adjust to changes in daylight length.
- **Brain chemical imbalance:** Brain chemicals called neurotransmitters (chemical messengers) send communications between nerves. These chemicals include serotonin, which affects mood and contributes to feelings of happiness. If you're at risk of SAD, you may already have less serotonin activity. Since sunlight helps regulate serotonin, a lack of sunlight in the winter can make the situation worse. Serotonin levels can fall further, leading to depression.
- **Vitamin D deficiency:** Your serotonin level also gets a boost from vitamin D. Since sunlight helps produce vitamin D, less sun in the winter can lead to a vitamin D deficiency. This change can affect your serotonin level and your mood.
- **Melatonin boost:** Melatonin is a chemical that affects your sleep patterns and mood. The lack of sunlight may stimulate an overproduction of melatonin in some people. You may feel sluggish and sleepy during the winter.

- **Negative thoughts:** People with SAD often have stress, anxiety, and negative thoughts about the winter. Researchers aren't sure if these negative thoughts are a cause or effect of seasonal depression.

### **How is seasonal affective disorder (SAD) treated?**

Your provider will talk to you about treatment options. You may need a combination of treatments, including:

- **Light therapy:** Bright light therapy, using a special lamp, can help treat SAD.
- **Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT):** CBT is a type of talk therapy. Research has shown it effectively treats SAD, producing the longest-lasting effects of any treatment approach.
- **Antidepressant medication:** Sometimes, providers recommend medication for depression, either alone or with light therapy.
- **Spending time outdoors:** Getting more sunlight can help improve your symptoms. Try to get out during the day. Also, increase the amount of sunlight that enters your home or office.
- **Vitamin D:** A vitamin D supplement may help improve your symptoms.

## Can I prevent seasonal affective disorder (SAD)?

You may not be able to prevent the first episode of SAD. But once your provider has diagnosed you with seasonal depression, you can take the steps below to better manage or prevent SAD from coming back.

- **Use your lightbox:** Start using light therapy at the beginning of fall before you feel SAD symptoms.
- **Get out:** Spend time outside every day, even if it's cloudy. Daylight can help you feel better.
- **Eat a well-balanced diet:** Even though your body may crave starchy and sweet foods, stick to nutritious choices. A healthy diet with enough vitamins and minerals can give you the proper nutrition and energy you need.
- **Exercise:** Try to get 30 minutes of exercise at least three times a week. Exercise relieves stress and anxiety, which can play a role in reducing your SAD symptoms.
- **See friends:** Stay involved with your social circle and regular activities. They can provide support during the winter months.
- **Find help:** Consider seeing a mental health professional who's trained in CBT. This treatment can be very effective for seasonal affective disorder.
- **Consider medications:** Talk to your healthcare provider about taking an antidepressant. Medications can help if your symptoms are severe or if they continue after other treatments. In some cases, taking the medication before SAD begins can prevent episodes.

Talk to your healthcare provider to find out if starting treatment early, as a preventive measure, is right for you.

## Don't

- **Isolate yourself:** Being alone can make your symptoms worse. Even though you may not feel like going out or being social, try to reach out to friends and loved ones.
- **Use alcohol or drugs:** They might make symptoms worse and can interact negatively with antidepressants.