

SAD Symptoms and Treatments

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Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), also known as winter depression, is a mood disorder in which people who are mentally healthy for the majority of the year experience depressive symptoms in the winter or summer. Notably, the symptoms of SAD fully resolve themselves with the change of season. Summer SAD is atypical but generally involves more anxiety and decreased appetite. The rest of this article will address classic winter-based SAD.

SYMPTOMS:

Depressed mood

Tendency to oversleep, but never feel rested.

Difficulty waking in the morning

Easily tired, generally lethargic

Lack of energy ranging to extreme fatigue

Difficulty maintaining a regular schedule

Over-eating especially sugary or starchy foods

Weight gain

Difficulty concentrating and processing information

Difficulty completing tasks

Tension, irritability, inability to tolerate stress

Decreased interest in sex and physical contact

Loss of interest in social interactions

Feelings of hopelessness

Lack of enjoyment in activities you generally view as pleasurable

Pessimism

Suicidal thoughts

For unknown reasons, 75% of SAD sufferers are women. Certain disorders, such as hypothyroidism, mononucleosis and vitamin D or iron deficiencies, can mimic the symptoms of SAD. So it is definitely worth getting your doctors opinion before you self-diagnose.

TREATMENTS:

1) Light therapy is the first line intervention and is effective for 70% of SAD sufferers. Fluorescent, full-spectrum, bright white light at 10,000 Lux is the medically preferred option, as opposed to blue or green lights.

Starting 'dose' is 10,000 Lux for 30 minutes a day first thing in the morning to maximise treatment response.

Sit 30-60 cm in front of the light with your eyes open but not staring at the light. Staring directly at the light has been linked to the development of cataracts.

The response to light therapy often occurs within one week but some people require up to four weeks to notice results.

Common side effects include headache, eyestrain, nausea, and agitation, but these are generally mild and transient or disappear with a reduction in your 'dose' of light.

Consistency is crucial to success with this method of treatment.

I recommend Northern Light Technologies. 1-800-263-0066

Putting in Full-Spectrum lights at home and work also definitely helps.

2) Exercise is the holy grail of healing but obviously requires a massive commitment. Aim to do 30-60 minutes a day of anything that gets your heart rate up, preferably outside at mid-day to maximise your daylight exposure.

At a minimum get outside for a walk at lunch everyday.

3) Vitamin D – 2000mg/day though some doctors recommend 5000mg/day in Northern winters.

Vitamin D can be toxic if you take too much so definitely get your blood levels checked by your doctor before and during treatment.

4) Avoid Sugar, Caffeine and Alcohol; everyone knows this but I really mean it!

5) Vitamin B – take one B50 per day in the morning, especially if you are stressed or on birth control pills as these deplete B vitamins. You might also consider a B12 shot from a Naturopath.

6) Omega 3 Fatty Acids/ Fish Oil – 1000mg per day

I recommend Krill oil in capsules because it is generally the cleanest source.

Scandinavian and Japanese people have much fewer SAD sufferers in their populations and it is theorized that this is due, not to genetics, but because of the amount of fish in their diets; fish is high in both vitamin D and omega 3's, unfortunately it is also often laced with mercury.

7) Negative Air Ionization has been shown to be 50% effective for treating SAD.

The recommendation is to use a high-quality negative ion machine while sleeping but you can use it during the day as well.

There are also negative ion machines that can be plugged into your car dashboard. If you are a commuter, I highly recommend this as driving creates a lot of harmful positive ions.

Running water and salt lamps also produce helpful negative ions but they won't usually supply a high enough dosage. That being said, a long shower can be quite uplifting, especially when you are running on empty.

8) Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Most conventional psychologists can help you with this, as do many self-help books on depression. It's not rocket science but it does require discipline.

9) Expose yourself to real sunlight as much as possible.

10) Medication - Bupropion is the SAD drug of choice, and SSRI's, like Prozac, are also effective.

Generally medication is helpful but it is important to remember there are always side-effects. The more natural approaches are equally effective in treating your symptoms.