

# Seasonal Affective Disorder

**What is SAD?** Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, is a mild to moderate form of depression that comes on as the summer changes into the fall and winter seasons. SAD is a cyclical depression where the feelings of “winter blues” come back each winter season.

## Symptoms:

- Increased feelings of lethargy
- Difficulty waking up in the mornings as the days get shorter
- Oversleeping
- Difficulty concentrating and thinking creatively in comparison to the summer months
- Incorrectly blaming oneself for things that go wrong
- Difficulty performing tasks that normally seem to be easy/enjoyable
- Increased craving for carbohydrate-rich food like chocolate and sugared beverages

Source: Giorgio Piccoli, 2007. *Beating the Winter Blues: A practical guide on how to get Through the Winter at Cornell*

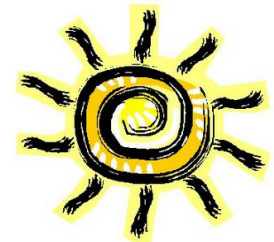
**Causes:** There is not a single known cause for SAD. More likely than not it's a combination of age, gender, heredity and your body's natural chemical makeup. Here are three contributors to SAD:

<b>Circadian Rhythm</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• this is your body's internal clock. Some researchers believe that during the shorter days of the winter months your internal clock is thrown off and your body has trouble regulating when to sleep and be awake.</li></ul>
<b>Melatonin</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• a sleep related hormone that increases during the dark months. This increase may lead to depression.</li></ul>
<b>Serotonin</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• a “feel good” neurotransmitter in the brain. A drop in sunlight can lead to a drop in Serotonin as well.</li></ul>

Source: Mayo Clinic Staff. *Seasonal Affective Disorder*. September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

**Risk Factors:** Women are more likely than men to be affected by SAD. There is also a slight heredity factor to SAD. So if your immediate family members are affected, your chances of being affected by SAD are also increased. Lastly, living in the more northern latitudes can increase risk. The further away from equator you live the higher your risk of being affected by SAD.

Source: CMHA October 10, 2007. *Are Dark Days Getting You Down?*



**Treating SAD:** First and foremost, if you are experiencing any of the symptoms above, consult with your health care practitioner. Below are two ideas that might “shed some light”...

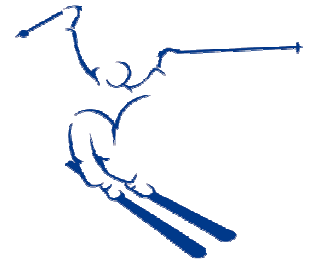
- **Regulate Sleep:** In order to get the most sunshine out of your day it's important to make the effort to be up during the sunlight hours. Going to bed late and sleeping in will contribute to the lack of sunshine you'll receive. Setting a regular sleep schedule is also important so you don't oversleep. Oversleeping and fluctuations in the sleep-wake schedule causes increase in levels of melatonin during sleep, which can contribute to feelings of depression. Aiming for a 7-9 hour sleep schedule is most beneficial.
- **Invest in a Light Box:** A light box is a small rectangular box that contains light bulbs with high intensities. This high intensity light mimics the sun's natural rays and will contribute to combating the low levels of light received in the winter months. Using the light box daily, for any time between 30 minutes and 2 hours, will help. Other helpful hints are keeping all blinds open during the day to allow as much sunshine in as possible. When waking up in the morning, open your blinds and let the light in. You'll wake up easier.



## Diet and Exercise for Combating SAD

**What to Eat:** Keep it simple! While we all crave carbohydrate rich food in the winter it's a good idea to try and minimize the amount of carbs you eat. According to Gannett Health Services, our bodies crave sugary/carby foods because they are effective at boosting the serotonin levels in the brain. Also they can spike your blood sugar that will also result in a crash later on. Keeping a balanced diet that keeps your blood sugar levels even is best. Choose to eat complex carbohydrates like whole grain pasta and rice as well as simple carbohydrates like fruit and fruit juices. Omega-3 rich proteins, like salmon, are great as well!

**How to Stay Active:** It should come as no shock that staying active is a great thing to do during the cold winter months. As the days become shorter it often becomes harder to stick to our routines and get off our couches to exercise. Not only will staying active help keep off the winter pounds but physical activity also helps boost endorphins. Endorphins are those "feel good" chemicals the body produces naturally, like serotonin. As mentioned, our body is already craving this chemical through sugar. Give your body what it wants and get moving!



Source: How to Beat the Winter Blues. The Independent. November 2007

*Tips are keeping active in the winter:*

- I. Go for walks during your lunch or before work while there is still light.
- II. Go straight from your work to the gym.
- III. Start a winter sport like cross-country skiing, snowboarding or skating. Even join a walking or running group.
- IV. Create a favorite at home activity for when the weather isn't great. Keep your favorite work out DVD on hand.

### Got a sweet tooth?

If you can't help but feed your sweet tooth here's a trick. Try saving your sweets for after a protein rich meal or snack. The crash you experience after a sugar "high" from an empty stomach triggers the cravings for more sweets to up the serotonin levels. Be smart and don't treat yourself on an empty stomach!

### Some Extra Advice

Stay connected! We know that most animals hibernate in the winter and wait for the spring months. Don't make your home your den. Keep up interactions with friends and family. The lack of sunshine can get you don't but be sure to get out and interact with loved ones! Our social connections help us deal with stress, the blues and feelings of loneliness. While the sunlight may be sparse don't let that be the winter motto for your friends as well.

### **MOST IMPORTANTLY GET OUTSIDE!**

While our time in the winter sunshine may be limited it's important to make every effort to get outside whenever possible. Every bit of sunshine helps fight off the symptoms of SAD.