

# It's a SAD Time of Year

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Seasonal affective disorder (also called SAD) is a type of depression that occurs at the same time every year. The most common type of SAD is called winter-onset depression. For most people with SAD the symptoms start in September or October and end in April or May. If you get depressed in the winter but feel much better in spring and summer, you may have SAD.

Experts are not sure what causes SAD, but they think it may be caused by a lack of sunlight. Lack of light may upset your sleep-wake cycle and other circadian rhythms. And it may cause problems with a brain chemical called serotonin that affects mood. Anyone can get SAD, but it is much more common in women, people who live in areas where winter days are very short, people between the ages of 15 and 55, and people who have a closer relative with SAD.

## Symptoms of winter-onset SAD include the following:

- A change in appetite, especially a craving for sweet or starchy foods
- Weight gain
- A drop in energy level
- Fatigue
- A tendency to oversleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability and anxiety
- Increased sensitivity to social rejection
- Avoidance of social situations and loss of interest in the activities you used to enjoy

## How is it treated?

Doctors often prescribe light therapy to treat SAD. There are two types of light therapy: bright light treatment, where you sit in front of a "light box" for 30 or more minutes per day and dawn stimulation, where you have a dim light that goes on in the morning while you sleep and gradually gets brighter over time, like a sunrise. Light therapy works well for most people with SAD and it is easy to use.

Other treatments that may help include antidepressants. These medicines can improve the balance of brain chemicals that affect mood. A third treatment is counseling, which can help you learn more about SAD and how to manage your symptoms.

## References:

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), MayoClinic.com  
[WebMD.com/depression/seasonal-affective-disorder](http://WebMD.com/depression/seasonal-affective-disorder)