



Seasonal Affective Disorder

What is (SAD)?

SAD, or Seasonal Affective Disorder, is a type of depression that occurs at the same time every year, usually during the fall and winter months. It is caused by a biochemical imbalance in the hypothalamus due to the shortening of daylight hours and the lack of daylight in winter. The hypothalamus plays a key role in ones' motivation, emotions, appetite, and thirst. The most important element is that the hypothalamus is the brain site for the body's "internal clock"; it regulates a person's biological rhythms. Due to the lack of sunlight the body's "internal clock" is disrupted, or somewhat fooled, causing a more abundant production of the hormone melatonin that is produced by the pineal gland, which is connected to the hypothalamus. Melatonin is the sleep-related hormone that is produced at increased levels in the dark. Just as we see hibernation in animals, these changes can cause our biological clocks to be out of step with our daily schedules too.

Who gets SAD?

Anyone can get SAD, but the prevalence varies with latitude, age and sex. Those living in higher altitudes are more at risk for SAD than those living in lower altitudes. Younger people and women are also at a higher risk for SAD.

What are the symptoms of SAD?

Depression: misery, guilt, loss of self-esteem, hopelessness, despair and apathy

Anxiety: tension and inability to tolerate stress

Mood changes

Sleep problems: desire to oversleep and difficulty staying awake, disturbed sleep and early morning waking

Lethargy: feeling fatigued and difficulty carrying out normal routines

Overeating: craving of starchy or sugary foods

Social problems: irritability and desire to avoid social interaction

Sexual changes: loss of libido and decreased interest in physical contact

Is there treatment for SAD?

Yes! Treatment for sad varies depending on severity, but can include self-care, light therapy, therapy/counseling services and medication management.

What can YOU do to help?

- Pay attention to moods and energy levels
- Plan active events for yourself in the fall/winter; exercise regularly
- Spend as much time as possible outside in the daylight (take caution of weather conditions)
- Arrange homes/offices to receive as much sunlight as possible
- Establish a positive attitude to enjoy wintertime
- Talk with your healthcare provider about checking your Vitamin D levels

What is Light Therapy?

Light therapy mimics outdoor light and appears to cause a change in brain chemicals linked to mood. It is one of the first line treatments for seasonal affective disorder. It generally starts working in two to four days and causes few side effects. Research on light therapy is limited, but it appears to be effective for most people in relieving SAD symptoms.

What to look for in a light therapy box.

Light boxes come in a variety sizes, strengths and prices. The important specifications you should look for to provide the optimal effectiveness, safety and comfort include:

- being successfully tested in peer-reviewed clinical trials
- provide 10,000 LUX of illumination at a comfortable sitting distance (about 23" is optimal)
- fluorescent lamps should have a smooth diffusing screen that filters out UV rays that can be harmful
- lamps should give off white light; full spectrum and blue lights can be harmful to the eyes and produce UV radiation
- light should be projected downward toward the eyes at an angle to minimize aversive visual glare
- smaller is not better: with compact light boxes, even the slight head movements will take the eyes out of the therapeutic range of light

GFAFB Mental Health Clinic 747-4460

***There is a light therapy lamp available for use in the relaxation room at the base gym, located in the Fitness Assessment Cell. The room is available whenever the gym is open. There is no need to schedule an appointment, just come on over when it's convenient for you, and you can enjoy a massage while you get some light!**