



The Wellness Family

Dr. John Ferguson Keeps You Informed

Seasonal Affective Disorder

As winter approaches, the days grow shorter and the nights grow longer. For those living near the equator the change isn't too dramatic but, as you go further north or south, the longer nights are accompanied by cloudy skies. Would it surprise you to know that those long nights and cloudy days can actually affect your mood? Well, it does and it's aptly named: SAD.

What is SAD?

Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD is a type of depression related to changes in the seasons. Typically, SAD begins and ends about the same time each year. It's estimated that as many as 20% of Americans are affected by SAD each winter with symptoms ranging from the blues to fatigue and, in some cases, more serious depression.

Also known as the "Winter Blues" it is no coincidence that it occurs when the days begin to darken and sunlight is at a minimum. Health and mood are directly linked to sunlight exposure or the lack thereof. For example, serotonin levels rise when we are exposed to bright light and this is the hormone typically associated with a good or happy mood.

Melatonin levels also rise or fall depending upon how much light is available. As the day darkens, melatonin levels will increase because our body recognizes that it's time to go to bed for the night. Light and darkness control our biological clock and circadian rhythm, which impacts the hormones that regulate our appetite and metabolism.

Our bodies were created to be affected by night and day: when it's dark, our body wants to rest, and when it's light, our body finds energy and motivation to be out and about. If we fail to get the amount of sun exposure our body needs this may result in SAD.

SAD vs Depression

The typical symptoms of SAD may mimic major depression and include but are not limited to: decreased energy, increased appetite, increased need or desire for sleep, loss of interest in usually pleasurable or fulfilling activities, cravings for carbohydrates, irritability and weight gain.

The main symptoms of depression (although they may differ from one person to the next) include: loss of interest in life or an ability to enjoy life; difficulty making decisions or concentrating; feeling unhappy or a profound sadness most of the time; feeling tired but having trouble sleeping; lost confidence and lowered self-esteem; avoiding social interaction or being around other people; feeling numb, despairing and empty; and suicidal thoughts.

The primary difference between SAD and depression may very well be the severity of the symptoms. However, the clearest indicator would be, unlike depression, full remission of SAD occurs in the spring and summer months.



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SAD Risk Factors

As with all disorders, there are some factors that may increase your risk for seasonal affective disorder. According to the MAYO Clinic, some risk factors include:

- Being Female – SAD is primarily diagnosed in women but those men that are diagnosed will typically have more severe symptoms.
- Age – Young people are at higher risk of developing SAD as opposed to older adults.
- Family History – People with SAD may be more likely to have blood relatives with SAD or another form of depression.
- Having Clinical Depression or Bipolar Disorder – Symptoms of depression and bipolar disorder may worsen in the winter months if you already have one of these conditions.
- Living Far from the Equator – SAD appears to be more common among people who live far north or far south from the equator. This is likely due to decreased sunlight during winter caused by shorter and cloudier days.

As always, identifying with one or more of the risk factors does not mean that you will definitely develop a syndrome or disorder. The above are simply factors to consider.

Treating SAD

Conventional treatment most often recommends exposure to bright light daily using a special light source called full-spectrum light therapy. Typically, SAD patients must spend about 30 minutes a day sitting in front of this light source. Light therapy has been purported to work (and be effective) in 80% of cases. The light affects brain chemicals that play a role in regulating mood and can relieve symptoms with a few days, but can sometimes take as long as two weeks or even longer.

Scientists generally recommend full-spectrum light therapy over selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as Prozac or Zoloft, as it can be equally effective without running the risks of dangerous side effects common with drug therapy options.

It's rare to find a non-drug therapy recommended first, but such is the case with SAD.

Vitamin D and SAD

Perhaps it would be wise to consider the logical connection between a vitamin D deficiency and SAD. Our body produces vitamin D when we're in the sun; therefore, someone spending too much time indoors will be deficient. It's safe to assume then that longer nights and cloudier days will also create a deficiency.

Research has shown a link between low levels of vitamin D in the blood and symptoms of depression. Yet, it has not been determined if low vitamin D levels cause depression or if depression causes low vitamin D levels.

In a review of studies about vitamin D and depression in 2013, researchers analyzed all of the published research about depression and vitamin D up until February 2011. More than 5,000 research articles were analyzed; however, just 13 explored this area effectively. More than 31,000 people took part in these 13 studies and, while the results did show that there is undoubtedly a relationship between low levels of vitamin D in the blood and depression, it was not clear whether vitamin D levels were the cause or the effect.

To date, clinical studies examining whether vitamin D supplements will help people with SAD have generated mixed results. However, a double-blind randomized trial published in 2008 concluded that there appeared to be a correlation between vitamin D levels and symptoms of depression and supplementation seemed to relieve some of the symptoms.

A study led by the researchers from the University of Georgia, in 2014, determined that low vitamin D levels may be associated with a greater risk of SAD.

Regardless of whether it's the cause or the effect of SAD, Vitamin D deficiency is very common, and should be a top consideration when looking for a solution to decreased energy and mood, especially when it occurs in the winter months.

Winter Wellness

Sara Hayden, a mental health therapist at TFP Therapeutic Services in Ontario, Canada, recommends the following strategies to address SAD:

- Vitamin D3 supplementation
- Full-spectrum light therapy
- As much time outdoors as possible whenever the sun is out

Additional recommendations to improve health and subsequently mood during the winter months may include the following:

1. Exercise – Regular physical activity will naturally increase serotonin levels.
2. Go to bed on time – A good night's sleep is vital for mood and energy levels.
3. Avoid processed foods – Refined sugar and processed fructose are known to have a very detrimental impact on brain function and mental health.
4. Optimize gut health – Fermented foods are important for optimal mental health.
5. Increase high-quality, animal -based omega-3 fats – Omega-3 is a vital "good fat" and needed for improved mental health and wellness.

The Chiropractic Factor

Your Family Wellness Chiropractor wants you and your family to enjoy all the health benefits of a wellness lifestyle. Health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

That is why your Doctor of Chiropractic wants to ensure that your family's spine is aligned and your living a life of health and wellness. Be sure to talk with your Family Wellness Chiropractor if you have any symptoms of SAD and see if there are any recommended lifestyle changes that can be made today.



*Dear Patient,
Dr. John is dedicated to providing you with the absolute best in family wellness care. So take a moment today to discuss with your Family Wellness Chiropractor any concerns you may have regarding your family's overall health and wellness.*

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