

“Seasonal Affective Disorder”

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Living in the Northeast Region there are things that we must inevitably accept. Colder weather, shorter days and less sunshine are just to name a few that we must endure during the winter months. This can lead us to feel more irritable and tired than usual. How do you know however when these factors become an issue? If these feelings recur each year and make it difficult for you to function in the winter months, yet subside in early spring and summer, you may be suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

Seasonal Affective disorder is a form of depression that occurs at the same time each year, usually during the winter months. According to the Journal of Psychiatry and Neuroscience it is estimated that 1-2% of the population in the United States and Canada are affected.

Do I have Seasonal Affective Disorder?

People affected by SAD usually describe similar symptoms that recur at the same time each year:

1. Disturbed sleep, categorized by either sleeping all the time or having difficulty falling asleep.
2. Lethargic and tired all the time, making it hard to accomplish your daily tasks.
3. Disturbance in eating patterns. Frequently people report having more cravings for sweets or carbs.
4. Weight gain
5. Feeling sad and irritable.
6. Not getting out as much and staying indoors.

What causes Seasonal Affective Disorder?

The disorder is thought to be caused by a lessening exposure to light during the winter months. Research has shown that light has a biological effect on neurotransmitters (brain chemicals) and function. One theory is that people with SAD have a disturbance in their “biological clock” in the brain that regulates hormones, sleep and mood.

Are there any treatments for SAD?

Bright light therapy has been shown to be effective in lessening these symptoms. It is an easy treatment with few side effects. Light therapy consists of using a light box device that is designed to deliver 10,000 lux of white light. This is up to ten times the intensity of indoor lighting. The device is placed to the side of your vision so that the light can reach the back of your eye. This is the most vascularized part of your body. The device should not be placed in your direct vision but should be between 12-18 inches from your face. Light therapy sessions usually last between 30-45 minutes. Side effects are few, but headaches and nausea have been reported. The best news about this type of therapy is that improvement is usually noticed within a few days with full effect after two weeks. Most people need to continue light therapy throughout the winter months until the springtime.



Where can I get a Light Box Device?

Some insurance companies do offer coverage for these devices if prescribed by your doctor. As always with any treatment you should consult with your physician prior to using. There are Light Box devices on line. Evidenced based research shows that a device that emits white light at 10,000 lux is the preferred standard. Average costs for the device ranges from \$100.00 to \$200.00.

Helpful Suggestions for Coping with SAD

There are other things that we can do to offset the symptoms of SAD. Here are a few helpful hints for you to consider:

- Get as much light as possible and avoid dark environments during day light hours.
- Exercise daily
- Rearrange work spaces at home and work near a window to set up bright lights where you spend most of your time.
- Stay on a regular sleep/wake schedule
- Eat small well balanced meals.
- Ditch the sunglasses in winter time when possible!
- Try putting lights on a timer. Some people report that it is easier to get out of bed when the lights come on.

Lastly reading up on Season Affective Disorder can help you feel more prepared as we approach winter. Following are some reading references that you may find helpful.

Resources:

“Winter Blues: Seasonal Affective Disorder: What It Is and How to Overcome It”. Norman Rosenthal, MD

“Positive Options for Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD): Self-Help and Treatment”. Fiona Marshall

Editor’s Note: The adult therapy team at Four Winds Saratoga treats over 2,000 adults each year in our Inpatient treatment programs, our Adult Partial Hospital Program and our Adult Intensive Outpatient Program. For more information about any of these programs, please [visit our website](#) or call our Clinical Evaluation Services at 1-800-959-1287.

