

# Does the Winter Make You S.A.D.?

When winter comes, the skies become gray, the air becomes colder, and many people have seasonal changes that affect their mood. These changes can range from simple “winter blues” to a more serious one called Seasonal Affective Disorder. (Affective is a psychiatric term for mood.) People who experience SAD have symptoms including:

- ◆ Extreme fatigue and lack of energy
- ◆ Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- ◆ Sleeping more than usual
- ◆ Increased appetite and craving carbohydrates
- ◆ Weight gain
- ◆ Decreased productivity



These symptoms can be caused by other medical conditions, too, such as an underactive thyroid, low blood sugar, chronic viral illness, and even clinical depression. The difference with SAD is that it seems to come on in the fall and disappear in the spring.

It is important to consult a physician if you suspect you have Seasonal Affective Disorder for a diagnosis and treatment plan. Self diagnosis can be harmful, as it is easy to misinterpret symptoms and their severity. Self diagnosis can also prevent a patient from seeking appropriate medical attention.

So, what causes SAD? One theory is that the winter season causes changes in the brain chemistry. Another theory is that the lack of light during the dark winter months disturbs our “biological clocks” which regulate hormones, sleep and mood. This would explain why less than one percent of people in Florida have SAD, while ten percent or more in Alaska and British Columbia experience the problem.

The good news is that SAD is treatable! People with SAD have been known to improve with exposure to bright artificial light (light therapy), usually in the form of a set of fluorescent bulbs installed in a big box. Sixty to eighty percent of people with SAD improve with sitting in front of a light box for as little as thirty minutes a day. With a physician’s authorization, the cost of these boxes is often reimbursable by insurance. Patients also improve by eating more carbohydrates and proteins, and keeping the diet well balanced. Regular exercise and counseling can often make a big difference. Medications also help the symptoms of SAD just like they can help people with clinical depression, so it is very important to consult your doctor if you suspect you might have SAD. If you think you or someone you love is suffering from SAD, or another form of depression, tell them there really is help out there! It does get better!