



## Let's Talk About Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)



CENTERPOINT  
Creekstone Office Park  
317 Creekstone Ridge  
Woodstock, GA 30188  
Phone: 770-516-7138

Email: [centerpoint@windstream.net](mailto:centerpoint@windstream.net)  
[www.centerpointga.com](http://www.centerpointga.com)



### What is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)?

During the fall and winter months, some people suffer from symptoms of depression that can appear gradually or come on all at once. These symptoms often dissipate as spring arrives and stay in remission through the summer months. For some people, this is a sign that they suffer from SAD.

### What Are the Symptoms of SAD?

Symptoms of SAD usually appear during the colder months of fall and winter, when there is less exposure to sunlight during the day. Depression symptoms can be mild to moderate, but they can become severe. Those who work long hours inside office buildings with few windows may experience symptoms all year, and some individuals may note changes in mood during long stretches of cloudy weather.

Symptoms can include, but are not limited to: fatigue, lack of interest in normal activities, social withdrawal, craving foods high in carbohydrates, weight gain.

Those with SAD may not experience every symptom. For example, energy level may be normal while carbohydrate craving may be extreme. Sometimes a symptom is opposite the norm, such as weight loss as opposed to weight gain.

In a smaller number of cases, annual relapse occurs in the summer instead of the fall and winter, possibly in response to high heat and humidity. During this period, the depression is more likely to be characterized by insomnia, decreased appetite, weight loss, and agitation or anxiety.

### How Does SAD Develop?

SAD has been linked to a biochemical imbalance in the brain prompted by shorter daylight hours and a lack of sunlight in winter. Just as sunlight affects the seasonal activities of animals, SAD may be an effect of this seasonal light variation in humans. As seasons change, people experience a shift in their biological internal clock or circadian rhythm that can cause them to be out of step with their daily schedule.

Melatonin, a sleep-related hormone, also has been associated to SAD. This hormone, which has been linked to depression, is produced at increased levels in the dark. When the days are shorter and darker, more melatonin is produced.

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Researchers have proved that bright light makes a difference to the brain chemistry although the exact means by which sufferers are affected is not yet known. Some evidence suggests that the farther someone lives from the equator, the more likely they are to develop SAD. For example, approximately 25% of the population at the middle-to-northern latitudes of the US experience winter doldrums, a sub-clinical level of SAD. These people notice the return of SAD-like symptoms each winter, but remain fully functional.

### How Is SAD Treated?

Increased exposure to sunlight can improve symptoms of SAD. This can be a long walk outside or arranging your home or office so that you are exposed to a window during the day.

If your depressive symptoms are severe enough to significantly affect your daily living, light therapy (phototherapy) has proven an effective treatment option. Researchers have proved that bright light makes a difference to the brain chemistry, although the exact means by which sufferers are affected is not yet known.

This form of therapy involves exposure to very bright light (usually from a special fluorescent lamp) between 30 & 90 minutes a day during the winter months. These light-therapy sessions are best used during the morning hours. Additional relief has been found with psychotherapy sessions, and in some cases prescription of antidepressants.

If you feel you are suffering from SAD, it is important to seek the help of a trained medical professional. SAD can be misdiagnosed as hypothyroidism, hypoglycemia, infectious mononucleosis, and other viral infections, so proper evaluation is necessary. For some people, SAD may be confused with a more serious condition like severe depression or bipolar disorder.

However, if you feel the depression is severe or if you are experiencing suicidal thoughts, consult a doctor immediately regarding treatment options or seek help at the closest emergency room.

There are no blood tests to confirm the presence of SAD. However, a trained clinician can diagnose the symptoms and suggest therapy options. With the right course of treatment, SAD can be a manageable condition.

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### Coping And Support

You can take action to help cope with SAD. Here are tips to help you manage the condition, in conjunction with your doctor or mental health provider.

- Stick to your treatment plan. Take medications as directed and attend therapy appointments as scheduled.
- Let there be light. Make your home sunnier and brighter. Open blinds, add skylights and trim tree branches that block sunlight.
- Get out. Get outdoors on sunny days, even during winter. Take a long walk, eat lunch at a nearby park, or simply sit peacefully on a bench and soak up the sun.
- Exercise regularly. Physical exercise helps relieve stress and anxiety, both of which can increase SAD symptoms. Being more fit can make you feel better about yourself, too, which can lift your mood.
- Take care of yourself. Get enough rest, eat a balanced diet and take time to relax. Don't turn to alcohol or unprescribed drugs for relief.
- Practice stress management. Learn how to better manage stress. Unmanaged stress can lead to depression, overeating, or other unhealthy thoughts and behaviors.
- Socialize. Stay connected with people you enjoy being around. They can offer support, a shoulder to cry on or a joke to give you a little boost.
- Take a trip. If possible, take winter vacations in sunny, warm locations if you have winter SAD, or cooler locations if you have summer SAD.

Article taken from the American Psychiatric Association and the Mayo Clinic Staff