

# Wintertime depression



If the colder weather and shorter days leave you feeling down, you're not alone. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) can cause symptoms similar to depression. Knowing what symptoms to watch for — and what to do about them — could help you and those you love.

## It's more than occasional sadness

Like other types of depression, SAD is different than just feeling sad every now and then or having a hard time due to situations like job loss, divorce or the death of a loved one. Depression occurs when you feel sad for more than two weeks and the feelings are interfering with your daily life activities. Symptoms can include feeling sad, losing pleasure in things you once liked, experiencing a change in sleep or appetite, and having trouble thinking or making decisions. People experiencing SAD may feel like they're hibernating: sleeping too much, eating too much, gaining weight and withdrawing from others.

It usually last about 40% of the year, and occurs during the months when there's the least amount of sunlight. Anyone can experience SAD, but it's more common in women than men and usually starts around ages 18–30.

## Tips for fighting SAD

While the symptoms of SAD usually go away once spring arrives, four to five months can feel like a really long time to deal with them. The good news is there are some tips you can try:

- **Get as much sunlight as possible.** While scientists don't know exactly why SAD occurs, they do trace it to circadian rhythm shifts: The body's "clock" is different when there's less sunlight. While it can be cold during the winter months in places where SAD is most prevalent, it's important to get outside as much as possible. Take a hike in nature, walk around your neighborhood or try a new winter hobby, such as fat-tire biking or snowshoeing. Also, arrange your home or office so you can sit by a window.
- **Try light therapy.** Sit in front of a special bright light (10,000 lux) for at least 20 minutes per day.

## Tips for fighting SAD (continued)

- **Consider vitamin D.** While the science isn't completely settled on vitamin D, it's thought to promote serotonin activity. People in northern climates get less vitamin D from sunlight, and food alone might not give your body all it needs. Ask your doctor about taking vitamin D supplements.
- **Get some exercise.** Physical activity isn't just good for your body; it's also good for your mind. Research shows all types of exercise have immediate and long-term antidepressant effects — and it's even more effective as you age.
- **Talk to an expert.** If you're experiencing symptoms of depression, it's important to see your doctor.\* They can help you make sure there isn't another health issue going on, as some health conditions like diabetes and hypothyroidism can trigger depression. The doctor may also recommend you try therapy and/or antidepressant medications.
- **Connect with friends.** The COVID-19 pandemic has made social isolation — known to increase depression — an even bigger issue than normal. Look for ways to connect even as you're socially distanced, such as phone or video calls. Just be sure to avoid talking about your problems too much. While friends can be great listeners, dwelling on negative feelings together (called "co-rumination") can actually make depression worse. So be sure to support each other. But find friendships that distract you from the negative and make you feel positive emotions.
- **Think about the positive.** Take time each day to write out what you're grateful for. Then revisit that gratitude list when you need a boost of good thoughts. Also, try to avoid self-criticism. While it can be tough, you can train yourself not to think about the past and what you could have done differently.

It's been a tough year for everyone, and the shorter daylight hours and colder temperatures may have an impact on many people — not just those diagnosed with SAD. This year, remember that you might have to make an even bigger effort to safely connect with those around you, to get outside and to keep up your routines. But the choices you make can make a big difference. And help is always just a call away.

\*If you're having thoughts of suicide, please know that you're not alone. For support and resources, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255, or text 741741 for the Crisis Text Line.

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