Seasonal Affective Disorder

Many people go through short periods when they feel sad or unlike their usual self. Often these periods are related to change in the seasons as the days get shorter and the weather begins to cool and sometimes, these mood changes are more serious and can affect how a person feels, thinks, and behaves.

Seasonal affective disorder, sometimes referred to as SAD, is a type of depression that is related to the change in the seasons. It often begins and ends at about the same time each year, starting in the fall and lasting into the winter months. Less commonly, the pattern is the reverse, with depressed feeling starting in the spring and lasting into the summer. It might make you feel like your energy is sapped and leave you feeling moody.

Not every person with SAD experiences the same symptoms, and they may not have all the symptoms listed below, but here are some things that are signs and symptoms of SAD:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood most of the day, nearly every day, for at least 2 weeks.
- Sleeping too much.
- Feeling sluggish or having low energy (feeling like "hibernating" for winter pattern SAD).
- Losing interest in activities you typically enjoy.
- Overeating, craving carbohydrates, and experiencing weight gain.
- Feeling hopeless, worthless, pessimistic, or guilty.
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions.
- Feeling irritable, frustrated, or restless.
- Physical aches and pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not have a clear physical cause and do not go away with treatment.
- Having feelings of not wanting to live.

For those who experience spring and summer onset SAD, you may feel increased irritability, poor appetite, anxiety, or insomnia in the summer months.

Resources

- NIMH (National Institute of Mental Health) Seasonal Effective Disorder
- Mayo Clinic Patient Education Seasonal Affective Disorder

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People who have bipolar disorder are at increased risk of SAD and episodes of mania might be linked to a specific season.

So, who experiences seasonal affective disorder? Well, it's estimated that millions of Americans may experience SAD, though many may not realize that's what they have. In most cases it begins in young adulthood. It's more common in women and in those who live farther north where the daylight hours are significantly shorter in the winter. It's more common in people with other mental health disorders and can run in families.

While research is still being done to pinpoint the exact causes of SAD, studies indicate people with winter pattern SAD have reduced levels of serotonin, a brain chemical that helps regulate mood. Research also suggests sunlight plays a part in regulating these levels and low vitamin D levels may exacerbate these problems. Other studies suggest that levels of melatonin (the hormone that tells your brain it's time to sleep) may be elevated in patients with winter pattern SAD.

So, when should you see a doctor? It's normal to feel down some days, but if you have several days at a time when you are feeling down and listless, or you can't get motivated to do the activities you normally enjoy, it's probably time to make an appointment with your healthcare provider. This is especially important if you see big changes in your sleep patterns, appetite, if you turn to alcohol or other drugs for comfort, or if you feel hopeless or think about suicide.

You may need to fill out a questionnaire to determine if your symptoms meet the diagnostic criteria for seasonal affective disorder, and you must meet the following criteria:

- Symptoms of depression or the more specific symptoms of winter or summer pattern SAD listed above.
- Depressive episodes occur during specific seasons for at least 2 consecutive years (however it is important to note, not all people with SAD experience symptoms every year).
- Depressive episodes during the specific season are more frequent than depressive episodes experienced at other times of the year.

Treatment for seasonal affective disorder might include phototherapy (light therapy), psychotherapy (talk therapy), or medications. It's important not to brush off SAD as just the "winter blues" or a seasonal funk. You don't have to tough it out on your own. Take action to keep your mood and motivation even throughout the year.