

Are You SAD? Managing Seasonal Blues By Lisa Schilling RN

The winter months can be a hectic time. But for some the changing weather and seasons can have an intense affect on feelings, sleep, hunger, concentration, and energy. People that face this annual struggle are said to have Seasonal Affective Disorder or S.A.D. for short. The shorter periods of light and cloudy days seem to be the cause of many adverse symptoms that sufferers describe.

One reason for this condition seems to be the disruption of your natural circadian rhythm. A tiny nerve cluster in the brain, dictates your internal clock and it is influenced by light. Because winter months provide less light, sleep cycles can become disrupted. This can cause many people to feel like hibernating. Just like a bear, they feel the urge to load up on starchy and sugary foods before settling in for a long rest.

Some of this has to do with melatonin, which is a hormone that makes you feel sleepy. Its release is related to the light and darkness cycle. When your brain notices a decrease in light, it signals the release of melatonin from your pineal gland. As light levels increase, melatonin levels go down and your body prepares to wake from sleep.

Your moods and total health are affected by a delicate balance of hormones. Hormones do not act alone; they affect everything from sleep to appetite, mood to libido. Light also affects serotonin levels, which are responsible for producing melatonin. Low serotonin is often a cause of depression, and neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine and norepinephine are related in many ways. Your body will try to address an imbalance by sending out signals to raise these levels. It is usually found in the form of strong carbohydrate cravings.

Carbohydrates fuel your brain to make and release serotonin. But it becomes a problem when you take in too many simple carbs. This can lead to an energy spike and crash as serotonin levels rise sharply then begin to drop. This harmful pattern can cause weight gain, headaches, guilt, and sadness. Women face other hormonal issues such as PMS and menopause, causing an even greater unbalance. Learning to deal with these fluctuations and altering your habits to help recreate balance can help you ease and avoid many hormone-related problems, including SAD.

Studies have shown that those with SAD often have a *delayed dim-light melatonin onset* (DLMO). Meaning when the sun goes down or lights are lowered, the brain is delayed in stimulating the release of melatonin. This can push back the sleep cycle, leaving you feeling more fatigued throughout the day. The good news is that studies have shown SAD can be treated with light therapy and it is effective for most people. By sitting in front of a light box or full spectrum light many symptoms of SAD can be completely eliminated.

Some symptoms associated with SAD are intense carbohydrate cravings, irritability, fatigue, sleepiness, weight gain and lack of interest in social activities. It is often confused with other forms of depression, but is differentiated by its cyclical nature. Symptoms of SAD most often appear as the days grow shorter in the fall and begin to improve as the light increases in the spring and summer.

Vitamin D deficiency can be found in some sufferers. Many diets do not get the amount needed for optimal wellness. Supplementing with the Vitamin D can be helpful. The best vitamin D is made by exposing your skin to natural sunlight. Today's society with artificial light and temperature control has forced people to work away from their natural rhythms and

cycles. Could this be why some feel so out of sorts when winter months roll around? As fall and winter move closer there is more pressure to be active. Nature has a design, but we have learned to work around it to the detriment of our natural energy flow. A healthy goal would be to make changes altering your lifestyle, to help return your body back to its natural rhythm. There are many things you can do to help the symptoms of SAD.

- **Get outside daily**
- **Try Light Therapy**
- **Check Vitamin D level**
- **Supplement with Vitamin D**
- **Take nutritional supplements**
- **Get regular exercise**
- **Keep a regular schedule**
- **Eat a healthy diet that compliments seasonal changes**
- **Avoid simple carbs eaten alone**
- **Opt for complex carbs and whole grains when possible**
- **Plan a short trip or vacation**
- **Consider professional cognitive or behavioral therapy**
- **Talk with your doctor about medications to offset seasonal imbalances**

Listen to your body; understand your natural rhythms and work to make your life flow with your natural bent and not against it. With this method, you can actively find answers to ease any wintertime blues.