

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Welcome to the **Pathway to Health** newsletter published regularly by Bayshore HealthCare to support families and informal caregivers in caring for your loved ones. Each edition features a new theme related to health and well-being, and also provides information, resources and suggestions to help you manage health issues.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that occurs when seasons change. Typically, SAD starts in autumn, as the days get shorter, and ends in spring, as the days get longer. Less commonly, SAD symptoms affect people in spring or summer.

SAD is not the same as the “winter blues,” the change in mood that many people experience when the days become darker and colder. People who have the winter blues may have low energy, sleep difficulties, gloomy emotions or cravings for comfort foods. They feel depressed, but their lives are not significantly disrupted. About 15% of Canadians get the winter blues.

SAD is a more serious condition, with signs and symptoms like those of major depression. They can include:

- Feeling sad or depressed most days, for more than two weeks
- Feeling tired or low in energy
- Sleep difficulties or oversleeping
- Feeling irritable, restless, impatient, agitated, angry, stressed or tense
- Feeling lethargic, sluggish, detached, empty or numb
- Feeling pessimistic, helpless, hopeless, guilty or worthless
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of interest in activities usually enjoyed
- Decreased interest in sex
- Changes in weight and/or appetite (overeating, cravings for carbohydrates)
- Heavy feeling in the arms or legs
- Trouble with decision-making, concentration or memory
- Frequent crying or feeling like crying
- Thoughts of death or suicide

SAD affects how a person thinks, feels and acts, and it can have an impact on daily life, including work, school and relationships. In some cases, SAD can be debilitating, making it hard for an individual to function. You may have SAD if you experience symptoms that begin and end at the same times each year and last more than two weeks.

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, about 2% to 3% of Canadians experience SAD in their lifetime, and SAD accounts for 10% of all depression cases. If you think you may have SAD or another type of depression, see your

physician for a thorough assessment and check for other health issues.

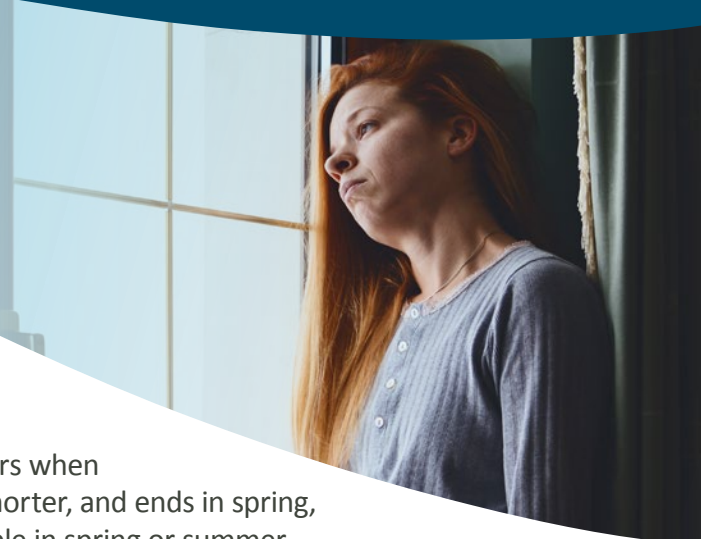
What causes SAD?

Researchers aren't entirely certain what causes seasonal affective disorder, but it seems to be connected to changes in sunlight. As the days get shorter and darker and we have less exposure to sunlight, this can disrupt the body's circadian rhythm, or biological clock, which in turn affects our mood and sleep-wake pattern. Diminished sunlight exposure can also lead to lower levels of serotonin, a brain chemical that boosts our mood, and higher levels of melatonin, a hormone that helps maintain the body's sleep-wake cycle. Too much melatonin can make us feel sleepy or sluggish. Our bodies need sunlight to produce vitamin D. In the winter months, low sunlight exposure can lead to vitamin D deficiency, which can also affect our serotonin levels. (It is not yet known whether vitamin D supplements help improve SAD symptoms.)

Who is at risk?

Certain individuals are at higher risk of developing SAD, including:

- Adults: SAD tends to start in young adulthood. The risk of SAD declines after age 50.
- Women: Women are up to nine times more likely than men to develop SAD.
- People who have a mood disorder, such as depression or bipolar disorder
- People with a family history of SAD, depression or another mood disorder.
- People who live in northern regions and cloudy regions: these areas have shorter days and less sunlight.



How is SAD treated?

There are several treatments for SAD. Work with your physician to find the right therapy (or combination of therapies) for you.



Light therapy

Also called “phototherapy,” this treatment involves exposure to a bright light (an approved light therapy lamp, light box or visor) for a prescribed amount of time each day, usually in the morning. Light therapy helps your body regulate serotonin and the sleep hormone melatonin. Most people feel relief from SAD symptoms within one to two weeks.

Consult your physician before trying light therapy. It is safe, but it does have side effects (headaches, eye strain, fatigue, nausea or agitation). Light therapy may not be suitable for people with certain health issues, such as eye problems, or light sensitivity due to a medical condition or treatment. Light therapy can trigger mania in people who have bipolar

disorder – ask your doctor what dose is safe for you.

Do not use a non-approved light fixture, which could damage your vision. Avoid tanning beds – their ultraviolet (UV) light can damage skin and eyes and increase the risk of skin cancer.

Medication

Your physician may recommend antidepressant medication, such as a serotonin-regulating drug, to alleviate your symptoms. It may take time to find the right medication and dosage. Follow directions and do not stop or change the dose without consulting your physician.

Counselling

You may find talk therapy, such as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), helpful for managing SAD. CBT can help you cope with stress and change negative thoughts and behaviours.

Other mood boosters

Your physician may suggest other treatments in addition to light therapy, medication and counselling. What else can you do? Getting more sunshine, doing regular exercise and practising mind-body techniques (such as meditation, yoga or guided imagery) can improve your mood. Eating a healthy diet, keeping a regular schedule (waking, sleeping and eating at the same times each day) and staying connected to family and friends are also beneficial to overall health and well-being.

Bayshore is pleased to provide information that educates you as you strive to care for your loved ones. The information is not advice and should not be treated as such.

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Bayshore HealthCare has been enhancing the quality of life, dignity and independence of Canadians in their homes since 1966. Offering a wide range of personal, home and community health care services through more than 60 home care offices and 75 community care clinics across Canada, we strive to make a difference in our clients' lives – every visit, every time.

Resources

CAMH

CAMH provides information on a wide range of mental health topics, including SAD and depression.

camh.ca

Canadian Mental Health Association

CMHA offers a free online program, *BounceBack*, that helps participants build skills to improve mental health.

bounceback.cmha.ca

Here to Help

BC Partners for Mental Health – a group of seven mental health and addictions non-profit agencies in British Columbia – offers free, anonymous online screening for mental well-being, depression, anxiety and substance use.

heretohelp.bc.ca

Heads Up Guys

This online resource from the University of British Columbia supports men in their fight against depression with tips, tools, personal stories and information about mental health services.

headsupguys.org

Online mental health resources

Visit the *Bayshore* blog for a list of helpful resources, including websites, apps and self-help programs.

bayshore.ca/2020/08/13/covid-19-mental-health-resources/



In an emergency or life-threatening situation, call 9-1-1 or go to your nearest emergency department.

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