

H3-3 Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

What Is SAD?

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a clinical depression that may persist throughout the winter months. It affects an estimated 6% of American adults and three to four times as many women as men. It is most common among people age 20–50.

Symptoms

- Depression
- Lack of energy
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Too much or too little sleep
- Increased appetite, often with carbohydrate cravings
- Weight gain

Causes

Light affects the production of melatonin, a chemical within the brain that regulates the sleep cycle. Light may also affect the level of serotonin, which imparts feelings of satisfaction and satiety. The lack of light during winter months is thought to bring about SAD in some people.

Treatment

SAD can be treated by exposure to light. Both the duration and the intensity of the light are important. Light boxes that produce 10,000 lux are generally recommended (500 lux is standard illumination in homes and offices). Light exposure usually lasts 40 or more minutes per day until symptoms diminish. Morning sessions seem to be more effective than evening ones. The amount of time a person needs to spend by a light box varies greatly among individuals and changes as the seasons progress. Some people need as little as 40 minutes of exposure daily; others require several hours of exposure, combined with psychotherapy and medications.

Because there are many causes of depression, it is important to consult with a health care provider or mental health professional before seeking treatment.

SOURCES: National Mental Health Information Center. 2004. *Seasonal Depression Awareness Month* (<http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/highlights/december2004/sad/default.asp>; retrieved June 7, 2005). Light therapy. 1998. *Harvard Women's Health Watch*, November. Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center. 1998. *Questions and Answers About the Use of Light Therapy in Winter*. (http://www.columbia.edu/~mt12/q_a.html; retrieved March 22, 1999). Dawn's early light to twilight's last gleaming . . . 1998. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 280: 1556–1558.