

Seasonal Affective Disorder (Winter Blues)

What Do SAD and the Winter Blues Feel Like?

- Significant, lasting, downturn of mood
- Apathy; loss of feelings
- Irritability
- Less energy
- Fatigue
- Boredom
- Overeating; weight gain
- Cravings for carbohydrates
- Sleeping too much; difficulty waking up or staying awake
- Less interest in being around other people
- Less interest in activities one used to like

How Are the Winter Blues Different From Clinical Depression?

- The winter blues are a subclinical (or mild) version of SAD
- SAD is a clinical depression that occurs during the winter months
- It dissipates during the spring and summer months
- To be diagnosed as having SAD, rather than a first occurrence of depression, one must have a pattern of recurring depression during the winter months

How Common Is It?

Between 10-20% of Americans may suffer from mild symptoms associated with the winter blues. Seasonal affective disorder (or SAD) may affect 5% of the population. About 1% of people in Florida get SAD; about 10% of people in New Hampshire get SAD.

Why Do We Get the Winter Blues?

- SAD has been linked to a biochemical imbalance brought on by the shortening of daylight hours and a lack of sunlight in winter.
- Your mood is partly influenced by sunlight, melatonin, serotonin, and vitamin D (cholecalciferol).
- Melatonin (sleep hormone) decreases when it is light.
- Serotonin (hormone associated with wakefulness and elevated mood) increases when it is light.

- Vitamin D helps the body maintain ↑ levels of serotonin during the winter.
- Light stimulates the production of cholecalciferol, which the body eventually transforms into vitamin D.

What Are the Risk Factors?

- Limited light exposure
- Younger people and women
- Distance from the equator
- Predispositions to clinical depression
- January and February – the most difficult months
- Feeling let down after the holidays

How Do I Prevent the Winter Blues?

- Expose yourself to light.
- Keep a regular routine/schedule.
- Have a regular pattern of sleep; get enough sleep.
- Exercise regularly.
- Do fun things.
- Eat in a healthy way; avoid overeating.

How Do I Increase My Exposure to Light?

- Expose yourself to the sun during the winter.
- Do an outdoor activity or ritual daily.
- Take a long walk outside.
- Arrange your indoor environment so that you are exposed to a window during the day; exercise near a window or outside.
- Take breaks outside.
- Expose yourself to more sun during the summer. This may help you build up a store of cholecalciferol that lasts through the fall. The amount of serotonin you have in the winter may be affected by your exposure to light the previous summer.
- Remember to use sunscreen and avoid peak hours.
- Use brighter full spectrum (also known as broad spectrum) light bulbs in your home/office.

What Do I Do if I Think I Might Have the Winter Blues?

- Consult a health professional. Symptoms of SAD can be confused with other medical

conditions, such as hypothyroidism or viral infections like mononucleosis. Evaluation by a medical professional is crucial.

- Use light therapy (phototherapy).
- Get exposure to very bright light (usually from a special fluorescent lamp) for 30 minutes each day during the winter months.
- Try dawn simulation with an incandescent light on a timer in your bedroom.
- Psychotherapy.
- Antidepressants.
- A combination of the above.

For More Information

The Union College Counseling Center provides counseling for students seeking help with the Winter Blues and with any other kind of depression. Please stop by the front desk of the Wicker Wellness Center or call (518) 388-6161 to schedule an appointment with a counselor.

Resources

Seasonal Affective Disorder, What It Is and How To Overcome It, by Dr. Norman Rosenthal.

Don't be Sad - Fight the Winter Blues: Your Guide to Conquering Seasonal Affective Disorder, by Celeste Peters.