

Knowing and understanding SAD.

SAD, or seasonal affective disorder, is a type of depression that occurs more in autumn and winter. Linked to shorter days and less exposure to sunlight, SAD can vary in intensity for those who experience it. This factsheet covers the symptoms of SAD and solutions for coping with the disorder.



What is SAD?

SAD stands for Seasonal Affective Disorder, which is a type of depression. Usually seasonal in nature, SAD tends to affect people more in winter, and occurs at a similar time of year.

Some people actually get SAD symptoms in spring and summer, but there is more awareness about SAD's impact in winter.

SAD is thought to be caused by reduced exposure to sunlight, which can have negative effects on brain function.

Recognising SAD

SAD symptoms have much in common with those of general depression. How severely you experience SAD varies a lot from person to person. You may find you have one of or several SAD symptoms.

If you have SAD, you may experience

- Low mood
- Lack of motivation
- Lethargy
- Sleep problems, especially sleeping longer
- Poor concentration
- Irritability
- Lack of self-worth
- Feeling hopeless
- Loss of interest in things you enjoy

Causes of SAD

Researchers are still investigating the causes of SAD. It's linked to lack of exposure to light, which can slow down certain brain functions like sleep, mood and appetite.

In winter months, especially in countries like the UK which have a significant change in daylight between seasons, the body clock's rhythms are disrupted, which can trigger SAD symptoms.

Hormones too are thought to have an impact on instances of SAD. For example, too much melatonin can make you sleepy, while a decrease in serotonin due to reduced light may lead to depression.

Dealing with SAD

If you believe you are suffering from SAD, you should tell your GP. Talking to someone about your feelings is the first step to getting better. Your doctor may then diagnose you with seasonal affective disorder.

NICE advises that SAD should be treated the same way as general depression. That means your doctor may prescribe:

- talking treatments like counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy
- antidepressants, which help to stimulate levels of serotonin in your brain

You can take time to decide what is the best course of treatment for you. Some people prefer medication to counselling, while others choose a combination of the two.

Light therapy

Many people who have SAD use light therapy to manage their symptoms. One of the most common types of light therapy involves using a light box. This can be a lamp that emits blue or white light, or an alarm clock that simulates natural light. While research about the effectiveness of using light therapy to treat SAD shows mixed outcomes, some evidence suggests exposure to a light box first thing in the morning, can offer improvements for SAD patients.

You should take care with light therapy if you have eye problems or take St John's Wort, which can make your eyes more sensitive.

Light therapy is not available on the NHS as a treatment for SAD, because it's not proven to work for everyone. You can still explore it as an option with your GP.



Whether or not your depression seems to be seasonal, it's ok to ask for help at any time.

Mind, the mental health charity