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Family Physicians Offer Advice on Seasonal Affective Disorder

(COLUMBUS, Ohio)—Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that follows the seasons.

The most common type of SAD is called winter depression. It usually begins in late fall or early winter and goes away by summer. SAD may be related to changes in the amount of daylight during different times of the year.

As many as a half million people in the United States may have winter depression; another 10 to 20 percent may experience mild SAD.

“Nearly all studies report a higher incidence in women, but SAD might be more severe for men. There is mixed data on the ages, but in general SAD can start at age 23 and decrease as people age,” said Renee Markovich, M.D., a family physician with Akron General Center for Family Medicine in Akron, Ohio.

Although symptoms are clues to diagnose SAD, not everyone with SAD has the same symptoms. Common symptoms of winter depression include a change in appetite, especially a craving for sweet or starchy foods; weight gain; fatigue and avoidance of social situations.

Symptoms may also include some of the symptoms that are present in other forms of depression. These symptoms include feelings of guilt, a loss of interest or pleasure in activities you used to enjoy, ongoing feelings of hopelessness, and physical problems such as headaches.

“SAD is the seasonal pattern of a major depressive episode. The variation is that it occurs with a change of season and then when that season ends it goes into remission. It is not really a separate diagnosis than depression; it is more a variant,” said Markovich.

Symptoms of SAD keep coming back year after year, and they tend to come and go at about the same time every year. The changes in mood are not necessarily related to obvious things that would make a certain season stressful, such as regularly being unemployed during the winter.

“Treatment is usually medications and psychotherapy. However, in people who are not suicidal there is a unique opportunity to use light therapy with ultraviolet ‘light boxes’ that can be used to simulate additional hours of sunlight during the day,” said Markovich.

“Also talk to your doctor about any symptoms you may be experiencing, eat healthy and be active; try new activities to keep you moving,” added Markovich.

For more information about SAD, consult your family physician.

The Ohio Academy of Family Physicians is a statewide professional association with more than 4,200 members, including practicing physicians, family medicine residents and medical students. The scope of family medicine encompasses all ages, both sexes and every disease entity. Family physicians provide comprehensive, continuing care to all members of the family.



FACT SHEET

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Common symptoms of SAD

- A change in appetite, especially a craving for sweet or starchy foods
- Weight gain
- A heavy feeling in the arms or legs
- A drop in energy level
- Fatigue
- A tendency to oversleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Increased sensitivity to social rejection
- Avoidance of social situations

Treatment for SAD

- Light therapy
- Medication
- Behavioral therapy

Source: www.familydoctor.org