

What is seasonal affective disorder (SAD)?

Seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, is a type of depression that occurs during the same season each year. You may have SAD if you felt depressed during the last two winters but felt much better in spring and summer. Some people may have SAD during the summer months.

Anyone can get SAD, but it's more common in:

- Women.
- People who live far from the equator, where winter daylight hours are very short.
- People aged 15 to 55. The risk of getting SAD for the first time goes down as you age.
- People who have a close relative with SAD. SAD is sometimes called winter depression or seasonal depression.

What causes SAD?

Experts aren't sure what causes SAD. But they think it may be caused by a lack of sunlight. Lack of light may:

- Upset your "biological clock," which controls your sleep-wake pattern.
- Cause problems with serotonin, a brain chemical that affects mood.

What are the symptoms? If you have SAD, you may:

- Feel sad, grumpy, moody, or anxious
- Lose interest in your usual activities.
- Eat more and crave carbohydrates, such as bread and pasta.
- Gain weight.
- Sleep more but still feel tired.
- Have trouble concentrating.
- Symptoms come and go at about the same time each year. Most people with SAD start to have symptoms in September or October and feel better by April or May..

How is SAD diagnosed?

Seek medical advice from your doctor. It can sometimes be hard to tell the difference between SAD and other types of depression because many of the symptoms are the same. To diagnose SAD, your doctor will ask if:

- You have been depressed during the same season and have gotten better when the seasons changed for at least 2 years in a row.
- You have symptoms that often occur with SAD, such as being very hungry (especially craving carbohydrates), gaining weight, and sleeping more than usual.
- A close relative—a parent, brother, or sister—has SAD.
- You may need to have blood tests to rule out other conditions that can cause similar symptoms, such as low thyroid (hypothyroidism).
- Your doctor may also do a mental health assessment to get a better idea of how you feel and how well you are able to think, reason, and remember.

What can you do on your own to feel better?

Regular exercise is one of the best things you can do for yourself. Getting more sunlight may help too, so try to get outside to exercise when the sun is shining. Being active during the daytime, especially early in the day, may help you have more energy and feel less depressed.

- Moderate exercise such as walking, riding a stationary bike, or swimming is a great way to get started. But any activities that raise your heart rate—including daily chores—can help, especially if you can do them outdoors or near a sunny window.
- Try to do muscle-building exercises at least two times each week, such as weight training or stair climbing.

Moderate exercise is safe for most people. But it's always a good idea to talk to your doctor before you start an exercise program.

Albertans can also access services by calling the Addiction Helpline at 1-866-332-2322, Mental Health Helpline 1-877-303-2642 or visiting www.ahs.ca/helpintoughtimes.