

health

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Canadians rage, rage against dying of the light

Sleep experts expect U.S.-led time shift to take its toll on the seasonally depressed

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TORONTO — If rising before the sun leaves you feeling blue after daylight time kicks in on Sunday, blame the Americans.

Daylight time begins three weeks early this year and lasts one week longer. Most of Canada has agreed to adopt the new schedule pushed through by the U.S. Congress two years ago in its bid to save energy costs.

But mental-health experts warn that extension, which begins March 11, could make people feel sad for a longer period of time. People with seasonal affective disorder -- or its milder version, the so-called winter blahs -- could be thrust back into depression-inducing darkness during a month when they might normally be seeing the light.

"So you've got a double whammy," said Michael Terman, director of Columbia University's Center for Light Treatment and Biological Rhythms in New York. "Not only is the winter forcing the sun to rise later, but we are now pushing it back artificially. It's analogous to shifting our circadian clock back into its February mode."

When most of Canada -- except Nunavut and Saskatchewan, the only large jurisdictions not using daylight time -- turns back the clock on Sunday, an hour of daylight will be taken from the morning and tacked onto the evening. In Thunder Bay, the sun rose yesterday at 7:28. On Sunday, the city will be in darkness until past 8 a.m.

While an extra hour of afternoon sun may make gardeners and joggers happy, experts say waking up in darkness is what really messes with the body's natural cycles that regulate appetite, sleep and mood.

"There's a biological clock in the brain . . . and that clock is affected by light," says Raymond Lam, director of the Mood Disorder Clinic at the University of British Columbia. "It looks like the dawn signal is more important than the dusk signal for that synchronization."

Between 1 and 3 per cent of Canadians suffer from seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, a clinical illness with symptoms ranging from extreme lethargy to depression. Another 15 per cent suffer from the milder winter blahs, Dr. Lam said.

"March is that time when they would ordinarily be starting to feel better," he said, adding most patients feel like themselves from May through October. "This will make it tougher for them."

But some sufferers are looking forward to the switch. Heather Stevenson, 45, is a mother of three who has had seasonal affective disorder since moving to Ontario from South Africa six years ago. It forced her to quit her job as a high-school math teacher, and from November to May she's in bed by 8 p.m. Some days she can barely move her limbs.

"I'm very glad to hear that the time's going back because it's lighter at the end of the day," she said from her Barrie home. "The worst time of day for me is in the evening with the sun setting at 5."

Researchers will be keeping a close eye on how this new shift in daylight time affects people with seasonal mood disorders, said Anthony Levitt, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto and an expert in seasonal affective disorder. "We've got this huge natural experiment and we'll see what happens. Will it be better for them or will it in fact be more difficult? . . . We're going to inquire with our patients whether there's been any difference."