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Your healthy living newsletter

GO - The Winter Issue

Wellness Notes: Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

The short, dark days of autumn and winter can be a time of great beauty, reflection and healthy hibernation. But for those with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), the colder months bring depression and anxiety. Some simple, natural treatments form the silver lining on SAD's grey cloud.

What is SAD?

SAD is a depression that comes and goes with the seasons, most frequently appearing during winter. (In rarer cases, SAD occurs during summer, when it's sometimes called Reverse SAD.)

SAD seems to be brought on when the body's natural circadian rhythms (your internal clock) fall out of sync with the season's light patterns. Light steadily decreases, more darkness creeps in, and your body somehow never catches up.

SAD's symptoms are similar to those of depression: feelings of hopelessness and anxiety, increased appetite/weight gain, poor concentration, moodiness and irritability, over-sleeping, social withdrawal and carbohydrate cravings.

Two Common Treatments

Light Therapy

Light therapy is intended to counteract the effects of limited winter light, one of the presumed causes of SAD. It requires sitting in front a specially designed light box that emits a bright, focused light usually 10,000 lux, which is comparable to indirect daylight.

Daily light-box sessions are typically about 30 minutes long and best done shortly after waking up. Users can eat breakfast, watch TV, read or run on a treadmill, as long as their eyes are exposed to the light but not looking directly into it.

The Mayo Clinic advises some precautions, so talk with your doctor first. For example, light therapy is not recommended for those with particularly light-sensitive skin or eyes. It may worsen bipolar disorder and severe depression, both of which have some symptoms similar to SAD's, so a correct diagnosis is vital.

Light therapy has been shown to effectively treat symptoms in some SAD sufferers, but it isn't a cure. For the approximately half of SAD sufferers for whom it works, noticeable results can take anywhere from just a few days to over two weeks to appear.

The non-profit Center for Environmental Therapeutics (www.cet.org) offers online resources, including light box recommendations and a handy tool to help you find your personal circadian rhythm; knowing how your internal clock ticks helps you time light therapy so it's most effective.

Melatonin

Darkness signals your body to produce melatonin, a hormone that makes you feel drowsy. One theory of SAD holds that it's caused by excess melatonin. But a 2006 study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* found that melatonin supplements, when properly timed, relieve SAD.

According to the researchers, low melatonin dosage worked on some SAD sufferers only when taken in the morning and on others only in the afternoon, depending on their particular internal wake/sleep cycle.

To treat SAD with melatonin, some trial and error may be required. For this reason, it's recommended that you explore this over-the-counter option only under your doctor's supervision.

Pills & their Alternatives

Another theory identifies a lack of serotonin, the neurotransmitter linked to depression, as a principle cause of SAD, but that remains controversial. At least one study, published in a 2003 *Psychological Medicine*, found no such link.

Still, antidepressants that boost serotonin levels (including Prozac, Paxil and Zoloft) are sometimes prescribed for SAD. These drugs, known as SSRIs, can have side effects that range from nausea to diminished libido to liver impairment.

Exercise boosts serotonin naturally and without the common pharmaceutical side effects. Research has found that regular vigorous exercise can reduce depression symptoms as well as antidepressant drugs.

A 2001 study in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* found that exercise offered significant relief, even in cases of severe depression and even for some who didn't respond to antidepressant drugs.

For specifically relieving the symptoms of SAD, Russian researchers found an hour of outdoor aerobic exercise (such as brisk walking) to work about as well as light therapy, while Finish researchers saw positive results by combining the two.

When compared with antidepressants, light therapy tends to have milder side effects (including rare instances of headaches, insomnia, eyestrain and nausea) and yield significantly faster results, according to *Consumer Reports on Health*.

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