



## **SAD: Seasonal Affective Disorder**

For some children, the change in season brings with it a shift in mood. Is it a passing phase, or something more serious? Here's what you need to know about depression, SAD, and your child. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) — often referred to as “winter depression” — is a subtype of depression that follows a seasonal pattern. The most common form of SAD occurs in winter, although some people do experience symptoms during spring and summer.



People with SAD may crave comfort foods, including simple carbs such as pasta, breads, and sugar. With excess unhealthy calories and a lack of fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, fatigue often sets in. They may become depressed and irritable. Eventually, they are no longer able to maintain their regular lifestyle. They may withdraw socially and no longer enjoy things that used to be fun. It's as if a person's batteries have just run down. For parents, SAD can obviously have a sharp impact on the ability to be an effective parent.

Children and adolescents can also suffer these symptoms. They may experience feelings of low self-worth and hopelessness. Children with depression struggle to concentrate on their schoolwork. Their grades may drop, worsening feelings of low self-esteem. Symptoms that last more than two weeks are cause for concern.

Researchers have not pinpointed what causes SAD. There is some evidence pointing to a disruption of a person's “circadian rhythm” — the body's natural cycle of sleeping and waking. As the days shorten, the decreasing amount of light can throw off the body's natural clock, triggering depression. Sunlight also plays a role in the brain's production of melatonin and serotonin. During winter, your body produces more melatonin (which encourages sleep) and less serotonin (which fights depression). Researchers do not know why some people are more susceptible to SAD than others.

Several effective treatments can help child sufferers of SAD. Simply bringing more sunlight into your life can treat mild cases. Spend time outdoors every day, even on cloudy days. Open window shades in your home. Exercise regularly and eat a healthy diet, one low in simple carbohydrates and high in vegetables, fruit, and whole grains.

Parents of children with depression should participate in their child's treatment and recovery. Learn about the disorder and share what you learn with your child. Make sure your child completes his treatment every day, no matter what form your doctor prescribes.

Plan low-key quality time together. Your child won't have the energy for an arcade, but reading a book or playing a family board game can be fun. Encourage your child to get exercise and spend time outdoors. Plan daily walks together. Fix healthy meals for your family, and establish a set bedtime to ensure he gets enough sleep and the same amount of sleep every night.

Your fatigued child will probably need help with his homework. Take time to work through schoolwork together, and communicate your child's situation to his teachers. Be patient with your child and reassure him that these issues will get better.

Whether noticing symptoms of SAD in yourself or depression in your child, take it seriously. Treating this disorder early and diligently can turn the dark days of winter into a pleasant time of togetherness for your family. Parents can contact our office and talk to one of our Care Managers for further assistance.