



Seasonal Affective Disorder

Many people go through short periods when they feel sad or unlike their usual selves. Sometimes, these mood changes begin and end when the seasons change. Many people feel "down" or have the "winter blues" when the days get shorter in the fall and winter and feel better in the spring when longer daylight hours return.

Sometimes, these mood changes are more serious and can affect how a person feels, thinks, and behaves. If you have noticed significant changes in your mood and behavior when the seasons change, you may be experiencing seasonal affective disorder (SAD). In most cases, SAD symptoms start in the late fall or early winter and go away during the spring and summer, known as winter-pattern SAD or winter depression. Other people experience depressive symptoms during the spring and summer months, known as summer-pattern SAD or summer depression. Summer-pattern SAD is less common.

SAD is a type of depression characterized by a recurrent seasonal pattern, with symptoms lasting about 4–5 months out of the year. The signs and symptoms of SAD include those associated with depression as well as disorder-specific symptoms that differ for winter-pattern versus summer-pattern SAD.

Not every person with SAD experiences all the symptoms below:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood most of the day, nearly every day, for at least 2 weeks
- Feelings of hopelessness or pessimism
- Feelings of irritability, frustration, or restlessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
- Decreased energy, fatigue, or feeling slowed down
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Changes in sleep or appetite or unplanned weight changes
- Thoughts of death or suicide or suicide attempts

For winter-pattern SAD, additional symptoms can also include:

- Oversleeping (hypersomnia)
- Overeating, particularly with a craving for carbohydrates, leading to weight gain
- Social withdrawal (feeling like "hibernating")

For summer-pattern SAD, additional symptoms can include:

- Trouble sleeping (insomnia)
- Poor appetite, leading to weight loss
- Restlessness and agitation
- Anxiety
- Violent or aggressive behavior

Winter-pattern SAD should not be confused with "holiday blues"—feelings of sadness or anxiety brought on by stresses at certain times of the year. The depression associated with SAD is related to changes in daylight hours, not the calendar, so stresses associated with the holidays or predictable seasonal changes in work or school schedules, family visits, and so forth are not the same as SAD.

If you or someone you know is showing symptoms of SAD, talk to a mental health provider about your concerns.

There are treatments available to help people with SAD.

- Light therapy
- Counseling/Therapy
- Antidepressant medication
- Vitamin D