

Treatment of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Everyone has days in winter when they feel tired and unmotivated, but when these feelings seriously impact physical and emotional health and day-to-day functioning, the problem may be seasonal affective disorder (SAD). SAD is a form of depression that displays a seasonal pattern, typically starting in the late fall or early winter. It is less common in summer months.

While the cause is unknown, SAD is thought to be due to decreased serotonin levels and increased production of the hormone melatonin, which regulates sleep. More women than men are diagnosed with the disorder, and it is more frequent in people who live far from the equator and get less sunlight during winter months.

People who have depression or bipolar disorder, or have a family history of depression, are also more likely to develop SAD. People who experience the signs of major depression are diagnosed with SAD only if there is a seasonal pattern that has recurred for at least two years.

Signs and Symptoms

The signs of seasonal depression include:

- Feelings of hopelessness, sadness, and depression most of the day, nearly every day.
- Low energy and low motivation; sluggishness
- Cravings for carbohydrates, leading to overeating and weight gain
- Excessive daytime sleepiness or excessive sleep
- Social withdrawal
- Difficulty concentrating
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Treatment Options

There are several types of treatment for seasonal affective disorder, which may be used alone or in combination:

- **Medication**, such as different types of antidepressants.
- **Light therapy**. Daily exposure to bright, artificial light is thought to relieve symptoms of SAD by replacing the diminished sunshine of the fall and winter months.
- **Psychotherapy**. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been shown to help people cope better with symptoms.
- **Vitamin D (maybe)**. The jury is still out as to whether Vitamin D is effective. The scientific evidence for its use has been mixed.
- **Self-care**. Getting as much natural sunlight as possible in winter months, along with regular exercise, healthy eating, and managing stress, are also important in controlling symptoms.



If you, or someone you know, is interested in addiction recovery services, primary care, or mental health care for children or adults, contact InterCommunity. To receive services at any of our Hartford or East Hartford locations, please call 860-569-5900.

