

Seasonal Affective Disorder: Care Instructions



Overview

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that some people get during the short days of fall and winter. You may feel unhappy and tired during fall and winter. But you feel more cheerful and have more energy in spring and summer. You may gain weight and exercise less in winter. You also may feel more grouchy during winter. You may find it hard to get along with family and coworkers.

Doctors think that having less natural light may cause SAD. Your doctor may recommend light therapy. This helps many people with SAD. With light therapy, you are near artificial bright lights for a set period of time each winter day. Most people do this in the morning. You should feel better soon after you start light therapy. You may need to keep doing it until spring. Your doctor also may prescribe antidepressant medicine and suggest exercise.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

How can you care for yourself at home?

- If your doctor recommends light therapy, use it as directed. Your doctor may have you sit or lie down a certain distance from the light. Two common types of light therapy are:
 - Bright light treatment. You sit in front of a "light box" for a certain amount of time. This is most often done in the morning. Be sure to read and follow the directions.
 - Dawn simulation. This is done while you sleep. A low-intensity light turns on at a set time in the morning before you wake up. It slowly gets brighter.
- Tell your doctor about any conditions you have and medicines you take before you start light therapy.
- Be safe with medicines. Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.

- You may need to try several antidepressant medicines before you find the one that works best for you.
- Don't stop taking antidepressants, even after your symptoms go away. If you continue to take them, it helps prevent depression from coming back.
- Antidepressants may have side effects, but the side effects go away after a while. Talk to your doctor about any side effects or other concerns.
- Get plenty of exercise every day. Go for a walk or jog, ride your bike, or play sports with friends. Try to exercise first thing in the morning during winter. This may help improve your energy level and relieve depression. In bad weather, you can use an indoor treadmill or walk at a mall.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet to relieve some of the symptoms of SAD.
- Try to spend time outside each day. Natural sunlight, even if hidden by clouds, is helpful for people with SAD.
- Do not use illegal drugs, and limit your use of alcohol.
- Stay active. Try to do the things you usually enjoy, even if you don't feel like doing them.
- Do not make major life decisions when you are depressed. You will make better decisions after you feel better.
- Consider counseling. A counselor can help you understand SAD and may help you prevent symptoms.

When should you call for help?



Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- Someone you know is about to attempt or is attempting suicide.
- You feel you cannot stop from hurting yourself or someone else.

Where to get help 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

If you or someone you know talks about suicide, self-harm, a mental health crisis, a substance use crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress, get help right away. You can:

- Call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at **988**.
- Call **1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)**.
- Text **HOME to 741741** to access the Crisis Text Line.

Consider saving these numbers in your phone.

Go to **988lifeline.org** for more information or to chat online.

Call your doctor now or seek immediate medical care if:

- You hear voices.
- Someone you know has depression and:
 - Starts to give away their possessions.
 - Uses illegal drugs or drinks alcohol heavily.
 - Talks or writes about death, including writing suicide notes and talking about guns, knives, or pills.
 - Starts to spend a lot of time alone.

- Acts very aggressively or suddenly appears calm.
- You feel like hurting yourself, even in small ways.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if:

- Your depression does not get better.

Where can you learn more?

Go to <https://www.healthwise.net/patiented>

Enter **J660** in the search box to learn more about "**Seasonal Affective Disorder: Care Instructions**".

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