

Getting Relief from Seasonal Affective Disorder and the Winter Blues

By: Dr. Ted Suzelis, N.D.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression caused by limited exposure to sunlight during the winter months. There are approximately 10 million Americans affected by SAD according to the National Institute of Mental Health, however up to 25% of the population may suffer from a mild version of the disorder. Symptoms of SAD tend to increase in the late fall months, are worst during January and February and resolve in spring. SAD affects more people in northern states and is the worst in regions of increased cloud cover. With its dense cloud cover and lack of sunlight, northeastern Ohio has a high rate of SAD compared to other regions.

Symptoms of SAD include:

- Consistent occurrence of depression during the winter months
- Lethargy
- Increased desire to sleep
- Increased cravings for carbohydrates, including sugar and starches, during winter months

Decreased exposure to bright sunlight causes the body's internal 24 hour clock, also known as circadian rhythm, to be disturbed, causing a series of events leading to depression in some individuals. One of the most important events to occur is a decrease in production of the hormone melatonin from the pineal gland. The production of melatonin triggers our bodies to fall asleep at night.

Many therapies can be employed to ease the symptoms of SAD. One of the most effective conventional therapies is bright light therapy. This consists of spending at least 30 minutes every morning in front of a bright 10,000-lux light. This therapy works best if done at the same time each morning. Real sunlight on a sunny day does result in better effects, but is impossible to accomplish in northeastern Ohio on a regular basis. Bright light therapy is thought to work on the body by restoring a more normal secretion of melatonin from the pineal gland, therefore helping to restore a more normal circadian rhythm.

Exercise is another therapy that shows good results in easing depression. In order to get the desired effect, one would need to exercise for at least 30 minutes; 3 times a week. It will often take a month or more to notice a decrease in depressed mood. Outdoor exercise or exercise in conjunction with bright light therapy can work even better.

There are a variety of natural therapies often used to ease SAD symptoms. Most therapies are the same as those used for other types of depression. Two of the most commonly used supplements are 5-HTP and the herb, St. John's Wort. Both St. John's Wort and 5-HTP boost the body's levels of a neurotransmitter, called serotonin, which is often not being produced in high enough amounts in people with depression. These supplements should be used with caution if you are using any pharmaceutical drugs and should not be used with anti-depressant drugs or with each other. There is also some

concern with using St. John's Wort with bright light therapy, as it may cause your body to be hypersensitive to light.

Other natural therapies used in SAD are focused on balancing the body's circadian rhythms. Some people can benefit from taking melatonin before bed to help restore the body's circadian rhythm. The small amount of research done on this subject has shown mixed results. Another supplement that is often used to restore the body's circadian rhythm is vitamin B12. B12, when taken first thing in the morning, can be beneficial in some people, especially when taken in the sublingual form that is dissolved under the tongue.

Eating a healthy diet is often beneficial in improving one's mood, especially when choosing foods that are right for your blood type. Eating a healthy diet, exercise, light therapy and using some of the above supplements can be a good way to combat SAD. As with most health issues, seasonal affective disorder is a complex problem and it is often best to seek a qualified holistic practitioner to assist you.

Dr. Ted Suzelis, N.D. is a naturopathic physician with offices in Newton Falls and Canfield, Ohio. His website is www.ohionaturopathic.com