

what you

NEED TO KNOW about...

Winter Depression (Seasonal Depression) Information for Parents and Caregivers

What is Seasonal Depression (Seasonal Affective Disorder)?

Seasonal affective disorder (also known as SAD, seasonal depression or winter depression in North America) is a type of depression that occurs in the fall and winter months. It usually begins in late fall or early winter and goes away by summer. It's probably caused by a lack of sunlight during fall and winter months.

"I used to really hate the winters. I'd get sad and start crying for no reason. I'd just hibernate - stop going out, sleep all the time, couldn't stop eating carbs, and I'd gain ten pounds every winter. And then I realized that really what I had was winter depression."



Doesn't everyone get a little bit down in the winter?

A lot of people get the "winter blues", where they feel a bit more down or sad in the winter. Winter depression is different. It's sadness that can really get in the way of everyday living.

What does Seasonal Depression look like?

Children and youth with winter depression:

- Feel sad, bored or more irritable than usual
- Need more sleep
- Feel really tired and don't have much energy
- Want to eat more, with cravings for carbohydrates (like bread, pasta, sweets), which may cause weight gain
- May want to avoid social situations
- Can be more sensitive to rejection
- Lose interest or pleasure in activities
- Have symptoms that come back every fall and winter (when there is less sunlight). It's sometimes hard to figure out if the mood problems are caused by a lack of sunlight or other things (for example, school and related stresses also start in the fall).

With more severe winter depression, children and youth may also feel hopeless or helpless. **If this happens, bring your child to see a health professional (like your family doctor).**

What do we do if we think our child has winter depression?

If you think that your child or teen has depression, bring her to a doctor (like a family physician or paediatrician) to make sure there aren't any medical problems that might be causing or contributing to the depression. Some medical conditions, like hormone imbalances, can cause symptoms similar to depression. The doctor may suggest more specialized mental health services, like a psychologists, psychiatrists or social workers.

How is Seasonal Depression treated?

Light Therapy (or Phototherapy)

Light therapy involves using a special lamp with a UV (ultra violet light) filter. The lamp gives the right amount of light, bright enough to treat depression. 5,000 to 10,000 'lux' of light are needed to treat seasonal depression ('lux' is a way to measure amounts of light).

How does light therapy work?

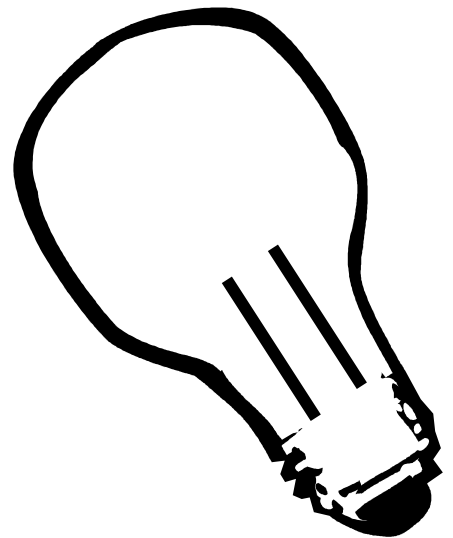
Light therapy gives the brain the light it needs during the winter. Children and youth using light therapy:

- Usually sit near a light box for 30-60 minutes a day, most often in the mornings.
- Don't stare directly into the light, but sit near it while doing other things like reading, working on the computer, or eating
- Start with 10,000 'lux' of light for 30 minutes a day
- Use it during the fall and winter, until spring, when there is more daylight
- Usually find their mood improves within a few days

Side effects of light therapy

When used properly, light therapy has very few side effects. Some children and youth may notice:

- Eye strain
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Trouble sleeping at night (if light therapy is used too late in the day).



Can anyone use light therapy?

Some people must be very careful about using light therapy. For example, people with:

- Bipolar or manic-depressive disorders (light therapy may cause a manic episode)
- Skin that is sensitive to light
- Medical conditions that make their eyes vulnerable to light damage.

Could tanning beds help Seasonal Depression?

Tanning beds are not helpful for treating seasonal depression. They provide a different type of light (UV light) that is more for tanning than for helping depression.

Other treatments for Seasonal Depression

- Back to basics:** Make sure that your child is eating well and getting enough sleep and exercise.
- Vitamins:** Some studies suggest that the reason light therapy is helpful is because it may increase our body's level of Vitamin D. But more research is needed before we know for sure.
- Antidepressant medications:** May be helpful in some cases.
- Stress management:** Help your child or teen figure out what is stressful, and come up with a plan to deal with these stresses.
- Counseling and therapy:** Mental health professionals can offer this help.

Coping with Seasonal Depression



Start treatments early. Get started early in the fall with light therapy or other treatments, before the symptoms start.



See the light! Try to make sure your child or teen gets as much natural day light as possible.



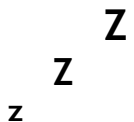
Get support. Educate family and friends about seasonal depression so they will be able to support your child or teen.



Get outside! Try to have your child or teen exercise daily outdoors during daylight hours. Even taking a walk can make a big difference. One study showed that an hour's walk in winter sunlight was as effective as two and a half hours under bright artificial light. Have a friend, brother or sister go out with your child, or go out yourself-the exercise will be good for you too!



Seize the day. Arrange family outings and social events for day time and early evening in winter.



Regular sleep. Try to keep your child or teen on a regular sleep schedule on both weekdays and weekends. Staying up late disrupts your child or teen's sleep schedule and 'inner clock'. This can be challenging with teenagers. But you can still help by keeping TVs and computers out of your child's or teen's bedroom. Youth are too tempted to stay up late watching TV or using the computer when these things are in their rooms.



Be a snowbird! If you are able, take your family on a winter vacation to a sunny place!



At school:

- See if your child or teen can have a seat by the window in class
- Have your child or teen take breaks during the day to be near outdoor light

Where to find help in Eastern Ontario

- In a crisis?** Child, Youth and Family Crisis Line for Eastern Ontario, 613-260-2360 or toll-free, 1-877-377-7775
- Looking for mental health help?** www.eMentalHealth.ca is a bilingual directory of mental health services and resources for Ottawa, Eastern Ontario and Canada.
- To find a Psychologist anywhere in Ontario:** College of Psychologists of Ontario, 1-800-489-8388, www.cpo.on.ca

Where to find help in Ottawa

- Youth Services Bureau**, offers counseling/therapy for ages 12-20, 613-562-3004, www.yzb.on.ca
- Family Service Centre of Ottawa**, for counseling/therapy for all ages on a sliding fee scale, 613-725-3601, www.familyservicesottawa.org
- Crossroads Children's Centre**, offers programs for ages up to 12, 613-723-1623, www.crossroadschildrens.ca
- The Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario** and the **Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre** offer some mental health services. Physicians can contact Mental Health Intake (613-737-7600 ext. 2496) for further information. Web: www.cheo.on.ca
- To find a Psychologist in Ottawa:** Call the Ottawa Academy of Psychology referral service, 613-235-2529. Listing many, but not all, Ottawa psychologists, www.ottawa-psychologists.org/find.htm

Where to find a Light Therapy Lamp

Canadian Manufacturers of Light Boxes:

- Northern Light Technologies, 8971 Henri-Bourassa W., Montreal, Canada, H4S 1P7, Tel: 514-335-1763, Toll free: 1-800-263-0066, Fax: 514-335-7764, Website: <http://www.northernlighttechnologies.com>
- Uplift Technologies Inc., 1-800-387-0896, 125-11 Morris Drive, Dartmouth, NS, B3B 1M2, Canada Tel: (902) 422-0804, Fax: (902) 422-0798, Website: <http://www.day-lights.com>

Other (non-Canadian) manufacturers:

- Apollo Light Systems, <http://www.apollolight.com>
- The Sunbox Company, <http://www.sunboxco.com>

To buy a light therapy lamp, you can go through the company website, or visit retailers such as pharmacies (like Shoppers Drug Mart).

More information

Useful websites

- Dr. Lam's SAD page at the University of British Columbia
http://www.psychiatry.ubc.ca/mood/md_sad.html
- Society for Light Treatment and Biological Rhythms (SLTBR)
<http://www.websciences.org/sltbr>

Readings for families

- Don't be SAD: Your guide to conquering Seasonal Affective Disorder*, Peter Celeste, Script Publishing, 1994
- Winter Blues*, Norman Rosenthal, Guilford Press, 1998



Authors: Written by the Mental Health Information Committee at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), and reviewed by members of the Child and Youth Mental Health Information Network (www.cymhin.ca). Special acknowledgements to Sylvia Naumovski, President, Parents for Children's Mental Health, www.parentsforchildrensmentalhealth.org

License: Under a Creative Commons License. You are free to share, copy and distribute this work as in its entirety, with no alterations. This work may not be used for commercial purposes. Contact the Mental Health Information Committee if you would like to adapt these for your community!



Disclaimer: Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

Provided by:

Last reviewed / revised May 17, 2010

References

Canadian Consensus Guidelines for the Treatment of Seasonal Affective Disorder, edited by Raymond Lam and Anthony Levitt, Clinical & Academic Publishing, 1999. Available also from <http://www-fhs.mcmaster.ca/direct/sad.html>

Lam RW, Levitt AJ, Levitan RD, et al. The CAN-SAD Study: A randomized controlled trial of the effectiveness of light therapy and fluoxetine in patients with winter seasonal affective disorder. *Am J Psychiatry* 2006;163:805-812.