



Feel better, work

Fact Sheet 8

Beat the winter blues

Hints for beating Seasonal Affective Disorder

Do you feel you suffer from the winter blues, or Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)? Do you get those down feelings as soon as the clocks go back? Well you're not alone. It's estimated that 1 in 10 people in the UK suffer from the winter blues (approximately 6 million people), whilst about one in 50 people in the UK get SAD, most commonly between 20-30, although it can develop at any age. More women are affected than men.

Symptoms of SAD

The symptoms of SAD can vary from person to person, and are similar to those that develop in other types of depression. The two most common factors associated with winter blues are: having less energy (wanting to hibernate); and just feeling low or depressed (just can't be bothered). Other issues, such as increased stress (especially leading up to Christmas) and increased bombardment from cold and flu infections, can all play a part.

The most common symptoms include:

- a low mood for most of the day
- lethargy
- a greater need for sleep and sleeping more than usual
- eating more than usual, especially craving carbohydrates
- weight gain
- irritability
- mood swings and excessive energy in spring/summer - but this is less common

Causes

The exact cause of SAD isn't fully understood at present, although there are theories.

Amount of sunlight

SAD may be related to changes in the amount of daylight during the autumn and winter. The amount of sunlight affects the levels of certain chemicals and hormones in the brain.

- A chemical called serotonin plays a role in 'lifting' the mood. It is thought that people with SAD may have abnormally low levels of chemicals such as serotonin in winter.
- A hormone called melatonin slows down the body clock, and affects sleeping and mood patterns. People with SAD may respond to a decrease in light by secreting more melatonin than people without SAD. However, drug treatments designed to suppress the secretion of melatonin do not stop the symptoms of SAD so this is not the only factor.

Genetics

Research has shown that if you have a close relative with SAD, you are more likely to develop it.

Diagnosis

A GP is a good first point of contact. He or she will ask about your day-to-day life and symptoms. One bout of the "winter blues" doesn't automatically mean you have SAD. But, if you have regular symptoms over at least two consecutive years in autumn/winter which clear in the spring, the diagnosis may be SAD.

Your doctor may also want to rule out other forms of depression.

Treatment

Treatments include light therapy (or phototherapy), drug and psychological treatments. However, there are a number of steps you can take to lessen the effects of SAD. Wherever possible, you should:

- live and work in light, bright environments – this can be difficult in a hospital so..
- make time each day to walk, run or take a bike ride outside, especially if it's sunny
- try to sit near windows when inside
- take regular, moderate exercise - for more information on exercise, please see the Q-active factsheet 5.
- eat foods for high energy - foods that give the best 'miles per gallon'. These foods are - unprocessed, organic, nutrient-rich whole foods such as apples, pears and berries and all vegetables, and also whole grains (oats, brown rice, wholemeal bread), beans and lentils. If half your diet consists of these whole foods, you are on the right track for natural energy. Avoid processed foods and refined carbohydrates such as white bread, biscuits, cakes and white rice.

More nutrition tips:

To improve mood we need to look at foods that increase levels of serotonin, the brain's 'happy' neurotransmitter. A protein called tryptophan is converted in the body to serotonin, so we need to increase our intake of foods rich in tryptophan. This can be found in foods such as fish, turkey, chicken, cottage cheese, avocados and bananas. Also, eating foods rich in omega 3 essential fatty acids (found in oily fish such as salmon, mackerel and tuna, and also in seeds) is thought to stave off depression as it acts on serotonin function in the brain.

If the thought of eating lots of vegetables, fruits and whole foods seems difficult in the winter, think of making lots of warming soups, casseroles, hot berry desserts. Also, use what's in season - all those root vegetables, carrots, swedes, celeriac, turnips, leeks and onions. Try combining a selection with some vegetable stock and brown lentils to make a wholesome soup or casserole (add fresh/dried herbs for extra flavouring); and follow it with a delicious apple and berry crumble. Comfort food can be nutritious and can help you get out of the winter blues!

Further information

The Seasonal Affective Disorders Association, www.sada.org.uk