

Got the Winter Blues?

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a mood disorder characterized by episodes of major depression that tend to recur at specific times of the year, usually in the winter. It is a subtype of major depression, and tends to occur more frequently in women than in men. SAD may be more prevalent in people who live at northern latitudes and in those who have a family history of mood disorders. People with SAD may also be more likely to have other conditions such as anxiety problems, ADHD and eating disorders. Lifetime prevalence of SAD may be as high as 10% in certain populations, and onset frequently occurs during teen and young adult years.

Symptoms of SAD include:

- Recurrent depressed mood that starts in fall or winter
- Afternoon “slumps” with decreased energy and concentration
- Decline in academic or work performance
- Carbohydrate cravings, increased appetite and weight gain
- Decreased interest in work or other activities, social withdrawal
- Increased sleep and excessive daytime sleepiness
- Lack of energy and slow, sluggish or lethargic movement

Depression screening tools may be helpful to find out if your symptoms could be due to SAD. You can complete an on-line depression screening at <http://www.wlu.edu/x30194.xml> to help decide whether you should make an appointment with a professional to discuss your symptoms further. A psychological evaluation may help establish a diagnosis, and your health care provider may suggest further testing to look for other causes of these symptoms before confirming the diagnosis. W&L students may schedule an appointment with a counselor in the University Counseling Center (540-458-8590) or with a physician in the Student Health Center (540-458-8401) to begin an evaluation.

Effective treatment options for SAD include counseling or “talk therapy,” light therapy and antidepressant medications. Decreased seasonal exposure to light may be a trigger for SAD in susceptible people, and light therapy has been shown to be effective in treating the condition. Light therapy is most effective when administered early in the morning and with sufficient intensity and spectrum of light exposure using units that are specifically designed to treat SAD. The following light dosing levels have been shown to be effective in treating SAD: 5,000 lux per day, given as 10,000 lux for 30 minutes, 5,000 lux for 1 hour, or 2,500 lux for 2 hours. Light therapy is generally safe, although intense light exposure during evening hours can interfere with normal brain circadian rhythms and sleep patterns and, like antidepressant medications, might cause problems in patients who have bipolar disorder.

If you have been diagnosed with SAD there are light therapy boxes available in several study areas in the W&L libraries you can use to help beat “the winter blues.” You can discuss this and other treatment options with your counselor or physician, as well as strategies to reduce the chances that SAD will recur.