

What is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)?

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that typically occurs during the winter months. While many of us may have a feeling of the "winter blues" during this time, people suffering from SAD experience symptoms that are severe enough to disrupt their lives and cause considerable distress.

People suffering from SAD often experience symptoms such as depressed mood, general fatigue, decreased physical activity, increased cravings for carbohydrates, withdrawal from social situations, disrupted sleep patterns, and excessive daytime sleepiness. In Canada, SAD is most prominent between December and February, though it can affect people anytime between the months of September and April.

What Causes SAD?

There appear to be three main factors that contribute to the development of Seasonal Affective Disorder; namely:

- **Heredity.** SAD runs in families. Often, people living with this condition will have at least one close relative with a past history of depression (often SAD).
- **Light Deprivation.** This appears to be the most significant factor contributing to the development of SAD. People living in the upper northern and lower southern hemispheres (where there are fewer daylight hours during the winter) are more likely to develop this condition.
- **Stress.** Stressful life events can aggravate the symptoms of SAD and contribute to depression.

What is the Impact of SAD?

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) can have profound personal, social, and occupational consequences for an individual. Some examples include:

- sadness
- anxiety
- decreased productivity
- weight gain
- sleep problems (either sleeping too much or very little)
- decreased sexual interest
- decreased immune functioning

Living with this condition decreases a person's quality of life for significant months of the year, often to a degree where they struggle to function in most areas of their life.

What is the Treatment for SAD?

An individual who suspects they may be suffering from SAD should seek the assistance of a health care professional, as proper assessment, diagnosis, and clinical management of this disorder are necessary to overcome the negative effects on a person's health. A sleep disorders center can best accomplish this, as they have the necessary expertise and resources to continually monitor and treat this condition.

Examples of the treatments used for SAD include:

- **Light Therapy** – exposure to bright light therapy has shown to effectively manage the symptoms of SAD and improve functioning in a person's daily life.
- **Medications** – treatments to date have typically relied on antidepressant medications by themselves, or in combination with light therapy.
- **Lifestyle Choices** – making healthy lifestyle choices can help alleviate the symptoms of SAD, such as getting sufficient exercise, eating a proper diet, and using appropriate stress management techniques.
- **Sleep Hygiene** – includes lifestyle practices to minimize or prevent sleep difficulties.
- **Psychotherapy** – has proven to be beneficial for some people; however, it should be used in conjunction with other treatments to effectively manage this condition.



The Canadian Sleep Institute's 10 Commandments for a better sleep

If getting a better night's sleep is your goal, and underlying medical conditions are not an impediment, you may achieve success by following the Ten Commandments of Sleep Hygiene:

1. Schedule a relaxing period before going to sleep, to separate your body and mind from the day's hassles.
2. Use your bedroom primarily for sex and sleep, and not as an all-purpose activity area.
3. Your bed should be comfortable, large enough, in a quiet, dark room, and at the right temperature.
4. Keep a regular schedule, going to bed and getting up at the same time each day. Don't go to bed until you feel sleepy.
5. Be consistent about taking naps. Take one regularly or not at all.
6. Exercise regularly in the morning or early afternoon, but do not engage in strenuous activity late in the evening. A relaxing, mild physical activity might be helpful close to bedtime.
7. Assess your caffeine intake, and avoid caffeine after 2 p.m. Smoking close to bedtime or at night causes further sleep disruption.
8. Don't use alcohol or drugs, such as sedatives. While they might help you initially fall asleep, they lead to sleep disruption and deprive you of deep sleep (at times, even for years).
9. If you feel hungry in the evening, have a light snack or a glass of milk. Heavy meals close to bedtime can result in discomfort and further sleep disturbance.
10. Above all, do not try too hard. If you can't fall asleep, don't lie in bed anxious and frustrated. Leave your bedroom to read, watch T.V. or do something else to relax, going back to bed only when you feel sleepy again.

- Adam Moscovitch, MD, FRCP (C), ABSM

The Good News:

Sleep specialists are in a position to properly recognize, diagnose, and treat Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Patients who seek appropriate diagnosis from a qualified sleep specialist are able to manage their condition and resume life in a happier and more productive way, one that more closely resembles their life at other times of the year. Our specialists at the Canadian Sleep Institute are experienced and well trained in the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of SAD, along with a host of other sleep disorders. If you feel that you could benefit from seeing a sleep specialist, call us for more information or have your family physician refer you to:

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Canadian Sleep Institute

The Canadian Sleep Institute is a leading centre of excellence in the provision of clinical care, diagnostic services, corporate consulting, clinical research, and education in the area of sleep and fatigue disorders. Our full-service, community-based sleep centre serves a patient population from across Western Canada, and is accredited by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta to assess, diagnose, and treat the full spectrum of over eighty sleep and fatigue disorders.

Our fully qualified team of clinicians, headed by a board-certified sleep physician, is focused on providing comprehensive, coordinated, inter-disciplinary care in the most convenient, accessible, and cost-effective manner available. We feature a state of the art, four-bedroom, overnight sleep diagnostic facility in a comfortable atmosphere and residential hotel-like setting. We also provide a full-service CPAP clinic and follow-up care program for those patients with sleep apnea and related conditions.



Canadian Sleep Institute
Better Health Through Better Sleep

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

**the winter months
can affect your sleep
and for some people
their lives.**

*Answers to Questions
and information about
Sleep and SAD.*

