



Seasonal Affective Disorder really does make you SAD

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Evansville Courier and Press
December 19, 2011

Winter is just around the corner. For some, it is a time of enjoying cooler weather, football season and planning for the holidays.

Many identify this time of the year as their favorite season, while others struggle with depression and isolation.

Seasonal affective disorder (also known as SAD) is a seasonal pattern of depression usually occurring around the same time every year. It occurs in about five of every 100 people. Four times more women than men experience SAD, and it also can occur in children and teens.

Individuals living with SAD often describe their condition as having periods of intense sadness starting during the fall and lasting through the winter months.

Many individuals with SAD are known to have the "winter blues" and periods of normal or high mood the rest of the year.

SAD symptoms usually come and go around the same time every year. Although there is no specific diagnostic test for the illness, some of the most common symptoms include depressed mood, hopelessness, social withdrawal, changes in sleep and appetite, difficulty concentrating, lack of interest in regular activities and agitation. Periods of depression followed by periods without depression during the same season for two consecutive years for no reason must be experienced for a diagnosis of SAD.

It is very common to have days where you feel down during the fall and winter months, but if you find you have several days of depressed mood with

development of suicidal ideations, contact your health care provider right away.

Specific causes of SAD are unknown. Potential causes are inadequate bright light, genetics and your body's natural chemistry.

The change in seasons naturally causes fewer daylight hours, which could affect your sleep-wake cycle and decrease the production of serotonin and melatonin in your brain. The decrease in your brain of serotonin, a neurotransmitter, and melatonin, a hormone, can cause a change in your sleep patterns and mood, leading to depression. That is why it is very important to maintain a routine sleep schedule, to get plenty of activity and exercise and to tend to your self care needs during the changing of the seasons.

Treatment for SAD includes light therapy, medications and psychotherapy.

With light therapy, the individual will need to sit a few feet away from a specialized light box so that he or she is exposed to the bright light daily. These specialized light boxes can be found online to purchase and even rent. The bright light appears to change the brain chemicals linked to mood, often improving the depression and motivation of those with depression.

Many individuals with SAD also take antidepressant medications and are recommended to attend psychotherapy during the fall and winter months.

Depression and mental illness can

affect anyone. It often can lead to problems with work-related difficulties, social isolation, substance abuse and suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Remember, you and your family are not alone, and help is available. Take all symptoms of seasonal affective disorder and depression seriously, and seek professional help if yours or your loved one's depression worsens.