

Cooperative Extension Service

(Your) County  
Address  
City, State & Zip  
Phone: (000) 000-0000  
www.ca.uky.edu/HEEL

## September 2007 Health Bulletin

This publication compiled and edited by the HEEL Program  
(Health Education through Extension Leadership) Staff

### Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)



Seasonal Affective Disorder (or SAD) is a kind of depression that is created by a biochemical imbalance in a part of the brain (hypothalamus). This imbalance is caused by a shortening of daylight hours between September and April. December, January and February (months with the least available light) are particular difficult for people who experience SAD. An official diagnosis is usually made after a person has this depressive reaction for three consecutive winters.

This disorder has also be known to occur, any time of the year, in people who work all day in windowless buildings without adequate light.

For some, the reaction becomes a seriously disabling illness and required continuous medical intervention. Other people react mildly, finding it unpleasant and bothersome, but not severely interfering with daily life.

Some people do not believe a person can be affected by the change in available light. However, medical records indicate that at least 10 million people in the United States do, in fact, go through this experience. This disorder occurs in the northern and southern hemispheres but is rarely observed within 30 degrees of the Equator, where days are consistently longer.

Because of the lack of understanding of this disorder many people suffer quietly, wondering why they are tired and unmotivated. People observing another person with this disorder can be rather judgmental, often referring to the sufferer as lazy, loafing, or hypochondriac.

Most everyone experiences some degree of depression at some points in their life. Lots of people will feel a bit more lethargic in the winter months – more difficulty getting out of bed, a little weight gain, more on edge. Most people continue to be able

to function at their regular pace. If, however, a person experiences the following symptoms to a degree that their daily routines are disrupted, specifically in the winter months, they should seek treatment.



Other symptoms:

- Oversleeping and difficulty staying awake
- Disturbed sleep and awaking early
- Feeling fatigued to the point of not being able to carry out normal routines
- Craving for carbohydrates and sweets ( this usually leads to a weight gain)
- Irritability – not wanting to be around people
- Inability to manage normal stress





- Lack of interest in sexual activity or even physical contact
- General feelings of misery, guilt and despair
- Hopelessness and loss of self-esteem

These symptoms can also lead to a weakened immune system, making the sufferer more vulnerable to infections and illnesses during the Winter months.

What can a person do if they are experiencing SAD?

- Make contact with a qualified mental health professional
- Be outside for at least one hour each day – Outdoor light is the best source of light for treating this disorder. A good one hour walk outdoors, even on overcast days, is recommended.
- Obtain a good physical exam to rule out any medial illness or other psychiatric conditions
- Talk with your health or

mental health care provider about the Light Box. This form of therapy involves sitting in front of very bright lights (about 10 times more intense than ordinary lighting) for the amount of time recommended by the care provider (usually 30 minutes to two hours per day).

- Some care providers may recommend an antidepressant, usually in conjunction with Light Therapy.
- Keep a check on negative thinking. It is relatively easy to add to the depressive symptoms by constantly thinking about bad or sad things.



Want to learn More about health in Kentucky? If so, check us out on the Web at : [www.ca.uky.edu/HEEL](http://www.ca.uky.edu/HEEL) You'll be glad you did!

**Insert Your Text Here!**



Sources:

- Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research (MFMER) (2006), Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), Mayo Clinic, Cleveland, Ohio.
- Rosenthal, Norman (1993). Winter Blues. Guilford Press, New York, NY.
- Watkins, Carol (2002). Seasonal Affective Disorder: Winter Depression. Northern County Psychiatric Association, Lutherville, MD, <http://www.nepamd.com/seasonal.htm> (Retrieved July 2, 2007).

