SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER (SAD)

What is Seasonal Affective Disorder?

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that occurs specifically during a certain time of year, rather than year-round. Most commonly, this occurs during the late fall and winter seasons. Symptoms include feeling depressed most of the time, feeling tired and hopeless, and loss of interest in activities that one normally enjoys. In winter-onset SAD, additional symptoms may include oversleeping, weight gain, irritability, and a heavy feeling in arms and legs. To diagnose SAD, a doctor will first perform tests to rule out other possible causes like thyroid disorder or mononucleosis. Additionally, symptoms must only be present during one season, and must occur in at least two different years in order to classify SAD.

Although the cause of SAD is not entirely understood, it is believed to be connected to the fact that there is less sunlight during winter months, which may have an effect on the body's circadian rhythm, as well as brain chemicals like serotonin and melatonin. Serotonin is known to play a role in mood, while melatonin helps with the body’s sleep cycle.

How is SAD treated?

Treatment of SAD is similar to treatment of depression in general, including antidepressant drugs and psychotherapy to manage stress and develop coping mechanisms. More specific treatments for winter-onset SAD are directed at the underlying cause of lack of sunlight. For instance, it may be beneficial to keep one's home brightly lit, which may promote healthy circadian rhythms. Being outside and exercising are other treatment options.

Another treatment, known as phototherapy, involves sitting in front of a box with a high-intensity laser beam for around 30 minutes a day. This laser simulates sunlight, which in turn helps restore the body's serotonin and melatonin levels to normal, as well as regulate the body's circadian rhythm. Phototherapy has been showed to be very effective in most cases, but can be expensive, and most insurances do not cover the cost.

If you are experiencing any symptoms of SAD, do not hesitate to talk to a doctor. There are a variety of treatment options available, and your doctor can help determine which of them is right for you.

For more Information:

- http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/sad

Key Points

- Try to stay active during winter months
- Be sure to get outside and expose yourself to sunlight
- Talk to a doctor if you experience any symptoms of SAD

75% of people diagnosed with SAD are women, and most are between the ages of 18 and 30. Other risk factors include a family history of SAD and living far from the equator.