



SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER (SAD)

Ask Your Pharmacist

Why will Monday, January 22nd be the most dismal day of the year?

The notion of Friday the 13th being unlucky has its roots in Victorian times, but the concept of bad days goes back thousands of years. Now we have a 'scientific' formula to calculate the worst day of the year. Dr. Cliff Arnall, a psychologist at the University of Cardiff in Wales who specializes in seasonal disorders, has devised a formula to calculate the worst day of the year as follows: $([W + (D-d)] \times TQ) \div (M \times NA)$. He claims that he factored in the dreariness of the (W)eather, the arrival of maxed-out Christmas bills or (D)ebt, minus monthly salary (d), (T)ime elapsed since Christmas and the failure to keep a New Year's resolution or to (Q)uit a bad habit, low (M)otivational levels and the need to take action (NA).

Based on that formula, the most likely day is the third Monday of January, which falls on January 22nd this year. While scientists may take issue with the validity of Dr. Arnall's formula, most of us can attest to a depressing feeling around that time, when the initial thrill of New Year's celebrations are over and the reality starts to sink in. One hardly has to be a scientist to conclude that on a dismal January morning, while one may still be recovering from the festivities, over consumption of alcohol and rich foods, the world is a far from cheery place. Indeed the very word 'dismal' usually applied to this time of year, is derived from the Latin 'dies mala', means 'bad day'.

Regardless of the validity of the formula, it does highlight the issue of winter blues or what is now termed by health professionals, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD.) or Winter Depression. SAD. affects approximately 10 million people in the United States alone. Women are three times more likely than men to suffer from this disorder. Seasonal mood variations are believed to be related mostly to daylight, not temperature. For this reason, SAD is prevalent even in mid-latitude locations with mild winters, such as Seattle and Vancouver. People who live in the Arctic region are especially susceptible due to the effects of polar nights. Prolonged periods of overcast weather can also exacerbate SAD. SAD is a serious disorder, sometimes triggering clinical depression.

Norman Rosenthal, MD, pioneer in SAD research, has estimated that the prevalence of SAD in the adult U.S. population is between 1.4 percent (in Florida) and 9.7 percent (in New Hampshire). In the U.S., the states Washington and Oregon are well-known for higher incidence of SAD risk. . Norway has the highest percentage of SAD sufferers than anywhere else on the

planet.

What is seasonal affective disorder?

For many of us, the colder, darker months can cause changes to our sleep patterns, energy levels, and mood. SAD is mostly triggered by a lack of sunlight, which is why it is common during the darker months and why it is referred to as seasonal.

Insufficient sunlight can affect serotonin levels, responsible for our sense of wellbeing, and melatonin, which is responsible for normal sleeping patterns. A type of depression, SAD causes affected people to have a marked decrease in energy, increased need for sleep, and intense carbohydrate cravings only during the fall and winter months. These symptoms completely disappear during the spring and summer, but recur during the winter.

WHAT CAUSES SAD?

Normal daily sleep and alertness patterns depend on natural sunlight, which causes a hormonal cycle within the body - the circadian rhythm. At night, the body produces increased levels of a hormone called melatonin, which decreases with daylight.

Because winter months bring shorter days, the body may begin to overproduce melatonin and other hormones in certain individuals. This brings intense fatigue during the day. The brain may also interpret such fatigue as a low-energy state, causing a craving for energy-rich carbohydrates like sugar and starch.

Symptoms of SAD include; depressed mood, fatigue and lack of energy, increased need for sleep, or difficulty awakening in the morning, increased appetite, often including carbohydrate craving, weight gain, and reduced work productivity.

TREATING SAD

Light therapy

Current methods of treating seasonal affective disorder involve light therapy. Light therapy is based on the theory that increasing exposure to full-spectrum bright lights will increase the levels of melatonin.

Studies have shown that natural sunlight is the most effective in balancing mood disorders associated with circadian disturbances. However, some areas of the world may only have a few hours, if any, of natural sunlight during the winter. Artificial full-spectrum light therapy may be useful in such cases.

People with SAD often experience tremendous relief through light therapy, in which they make an effort to spend at least a few hours each day in sunlight or full-spectrum artificial light. Both the American Medical Association and the American Psychiatric Association recommend light therapy. Light therapy is as simple as it

for your best health

Visit our pharmacy or website to learn more about SAD.

SAD (continued)

sounds - adding more light to the environment.

A specially designed light, many times brighter than normal office lighting, is placed near the sufferer. It should provide a dose of 10,000 lux, and be used for 30-60 minutes daily. The sufferer should remain within sight of the light-box, with their eyes open and unshielded, but not directly staring at the lights. The best time to administer light therapy is still a matter of debate, though use in the morning has been suggested to mimic the effects of normal dawn on the patient. In fact, some studies have shown dawn simulation to be more effective than bright lights in treating SAD.

Antidepressants

In some cases, antidepressants are also prescribed. Most of these drugs work by increasing the actions and effects of the chemical stimulants noradrenaline and serotonin in the body. Medications known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) have proven effective in treating SAD. Examples of these antidepressants are fluoxetine (Prozac), sertraline (Zoloft), or paroxetine (Paxil) and bupropion (Wellbutrin XL).

Beating Winter Blues

Be Active: Get some exercise, even if it's only a walk. This will help to keep you physically fit and you will sleep better.

Increase the amount of light intake: Spend some time outdoors to ensure that you get at least 30 minutes of natural light in the middle of the day. Add lamps or skylights and trim trees or bushes that block sunlight. Sit near a window whenever possible

Maintain a consistent sleep schedule

Talk about your feelings: If you are feeling down, don't bottle things up - talk to a friend or family member about it.

Ease your stress by learning to relax: Try exercising, yoga, massage, aromatherapy etc. Set some time aside regularly each week to do something you really enjoy.

Avoid alcohol: Alcohol may make you feel better for a couple of hours, but it will make you more depressed in the long run.

Dress more brightly: Dr Evelyn Millings, a Glasgow psychologist says: "When the weather is so gloomy and you look around and everyone is walking about in blacks, greys and browns, that in itself can be quite depressing."

Take a vacation: Go to a sunny, warm location, if you are able to.

Negative air ionization

Studies by Dr. Michael Terman show the benefit of negative air ionization, where people passively receive charged particles from an electronic device. Ionizers for air cleaning work by releasing a negative ion, a molecule that contains an extra electron. In nature, these negatively charged particles are created by the sun, wind, moving water, etc. These ions cling to the dirt, which is positively charged, and settle down, making the air cleaner like fresh air after a thunderstorm. Researchers have found that having these devices in the proximity of the SAD sufferer helps reduce the irritation and depression, while improving their energy level.

Two well-conducted studies have looked at the effects of air ionization on winter depression. Both of these studies compared a high-density air ionizer with a low-density ionizer. People sat in a room at home with the ionizer for 30 minutes every morning over a 2-3 week period. People with winter depression who used the high-density ionizer showed much more improvement than those who used the low-density ionizer.

HOLIDAY STRESS AND SAD

Holiday stress, which greatly contributes to SAD, is a recognized occurrence, and while not technically a disease, it can be debilitating. There is a definite link between loss of energy and stress, to foods and digestion. Gaining weight this time of the year is not unusual, either.

NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENTS

Supplementation with the amino acid L-tryptophan may be as effective as light therapy in treating seasonal affective disorder. Proper levels of vitamin B6 are necessary for the production of serotonin and other neurotransmitters that play

a role in regulating mood.

Folate and vitamin B12 help the body make certain substances (S-adenosylmethionine) that are important for proper function of the nervous system. Low levels of folate and vitamin B12 have been shown to aggravate depressive disorders. Studies have shown that depression lowers blood levels of vitamin C. Tyrosine is directly involved in the production of serotonin, the neurotransmitter that balances mood.

HERBS

St. John's Wort, or hypericum, has been used for centuries to help combat depression and is quite possibly one of the most effective herbs available, providing it is used as a whole. St. John's Wort increases the production of serotonin, thereby helping to stabilize mood. Sometimes referred to as the sunshine herb, hypericum works by influencing chemicals in the brain - by prolonging the action, it is thought, of the happy hormone serotonin and by increasing levels of the sleep hormone melatonin. Scientists have identified individual active ingredients such as hypericin and hyperforin, but it is widely accepted that the balanced effect of all the substances within the plant are needed for it to work. Another herb, Valerian, has been shown to reduce depression and promote restful sleep.

It is important to seek the guidance of your pharmacist before self-treating S.A.D. symptoms, as certain supplements or herbs may interact with your prescription medications.