

# Seasonal Affective Disorder

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Are you SAD about this time of year? Your SAD could be “Seasonal Affective Disorder”. Really! When the days get shorter and grayer as we experience this time of year, a lot of us just get blue. We don’t feel like doing as much, go to bed earlier, feel more tired....kind of want to hibernate. We eat more and move less. This can be unhealthy. As the season drags on, without much sunlight, we can get a bad case of “cabin fever” and can’t wait until spring. Sometimes, though, this can lead to a type of depression called Seasonal Affective Disorder. This is really true, and is much more common above the 45<sup>th</sup> parallel and in places like the cold and dark winters in Alaska, rainy and gloomy Seattle and our own cloudy and gray northern Michigan. If Seasonal Affective Disorder is not unattended to it can lead to a full blown case of depression, making for far more than just a blue Christmas.

What can a northern Michigander do to combat SAD, short of becoming a snowbird? We need to recognize if we are becoming affected. SAD often occurs the same time of the fall or winter for people, so pay attention if you feel this way every fall or winter. Symptoms include just feeling more sad or hopeless (especially in contrast to how we think everyone else is so happy at Christmas), tired, sleeping more, craving carbohydrate foods more, gaining weight, having less interest in things we usually enjoy, difficulty concentrating, becoming more anxious or irritable....you get the picture. Pre-existing depression can often get worse.

So what to do? Well, just like regular depression, it is not that simple to “pull yourself up by your bootstraps”, but there are measures that are worth taking. First is indeed just that...pulling on your boots (or snowshoes, or skis) and getting outside, especially if it is nice sunny winter day. Just 15-20 minutes of sun on our faces and in our eyes can make a difference. Next, LIGHT can make a big difference. Open the shades, turn on bright higher lux indoor lights, and even consider buying a light box for “phototherapy” for times you are reading earlier in the day (many commercial light boxes are available). A lot of medical studies show the benefit of light to combat SAD. Websites with good information on this include [mayoclinic.com](http://mayoclinic.com) and [familydoctor.org](http://familydoctor.org).

What about Vitamin D? The medical profession has become more aware over the last decade of the importance of this vitamin in many things. There are some good medical studies showing that shoring up a low Vitamin D level can work even better than light therapy to help improve SAD. It is probably best to discuss what dose is good for you with your family doctor, but standard doses of 400-800 IUs (international units) are usually a starting dose. During the summer, most of our Vitamin D comes from ....sunlight!

More than just getting outside for sun, EXERCISE can help ward off SAD too. Regular get -your- heart- beating -and -legs moving exercise actually helps our “brain fuels” (or neurotransmitters like serotonin) work better. We sleep better on days we exercise. If sleep gets off kilter because of SAD, steer clear of alcohol, it just makes things worse....and actually disrupts sound sleep.

Obviously limiting the caffeine makes sense too. We usually advise folks to avoid over the counter sleep medication like Benadryl (or diphenhydramine), but for SAD the over the counter medication, melatonin, can safely help with sleep patterns. Again, talk with your LTPC family physician and our Patient-Centered Medical Home team about all of this if you think you need to!

Sometimes prescription medication and professional counseling are used for SAD, just like for regular depression, even on a seasonal basis. It is not a stigma to need such help. We often think feeling sad or depressed is some kind of personal weakness.....when it is really a biochemical depletion of our brain fuels. The wise thing to do is ask for help, especially if you are feeling like life is not worth living or having suicidal thoughts.

Florida has its hurricanes, California its earthquakes, Texas its tornadoes and Hawaii its...well, volcanoes I guess! In contrast our beautiful northern Michigan has its few months of gray winter. Don't let this get you SAD....know what SAD is, work against it, and come out shining! And again, let us help you help yourself. Have a BRIGHT Christmas season!