

How to Cope with the 'Winter Blues'

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) affects 9.7% of Americans, causing depression during winter months. It's classified as a major depressive disorder with symptoms like sadness, fatigue and appetite changes
- › Vitamin D from sunlight is crucial for mental health. People living far from the equator are more susceptible to SAD due to limited sun exposure during winter
- › Light therapy (30 minutes of 10,000 lux light exposure each morning) helps treat SAD symptoms and offers fewer side effects than antidepressant medications
- › Exercise, especially outdoor activities, helps combat SAD by releasing endorphins. Studies show walking, jogging, strength training and yoga are particularly effective against depression
- › Diet plays a vital role in managing SAD, as being deficient in B vitamins, vitamin C and vitamin D are also linked to depression. Avoiding ultraprocessed foods and artificial sweeteners is recommended

Are you one of those people who feel a sense of dread, loneliness and anxiety when the days start getting colder and the nights become longer? You're not alone; every year, millions of Americans, mostly women,¹ struggle with seasonal affective disorder (SAD), also known as "winter blues."

SAD affects around 9.7% of the U.S. population.² For some, it doesn't just occur during the winter months — they harbor these feelings of depression 40% of the year.³ And

while it seems like a simple case of "feeling the blues," for most sufferers, it becomes severe and affects their quality of life.

Defining Winter Blues – How Is It Different from Depression?

Seasonal affective disorder or SAD is defined as "a form of recurrent depression in which the episodes occur annually, and the severity of the episode varies."⁴ Simply put, it's a yearly disorder that typically ramps up during the fall and winter months, then disappears when spring comes. In an Associated Press News article, Germaine Pataki, a 63-year-old woman who suffers from SAD, describes it as "a feeling of panic, fear, anxiety and dread all in one."⁵

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders by the American Psychiatric Association, SAD is classified as a type of bipolar disorder or depression, called MDD (major depressive disorder) with a seasonal pattern. Its symptoms include:⁶

Feelings of sadness or depression	Losing interest in activities that were previously enjoyable
Appetite changes, usually craving for carbohydrates	Sleeping too much
Fatigue or loss of energy	Increase in purposeless physical activity (unable to sit still, pacing or wringing hands)
Slowed movements or speech	Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
Difficulty concentrating or making decisions	Having suicidal thoughts

There Are Ways to Beat the Winter Blues

As with other forms of depression, SAD does not have a "one-size-fits-all" nature; the severity of the symptoms, as well as how long they last, varies from one person to another.

According to those who experience the winter blues recurrently, their symptoms usually occur for four to five months of the year. Others experience it for only a few weeks, while some feel the effects from the start of fall until the early days of spring.

And while the conventional advice is to take antidepressants, there are other effective ways to uplift your mood without resorting to pharmaceutical drugs. In a systematic review published in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*,⁷ researchers examined the effectiveness and safety of lifestyle modifications.

The researchers assessed six randomized controlled trials and looked at four areas of lifestyle modification, including diet/nutrition, exercise, sleep and music therapy. They noted that although there are limitations to the studies, these modifications offer promising results.

"Lifestyle modifications may have great therapeutic potential as they tend to be safe, multimodal and show a good adherence. They also could possibly be implemented effortlessly by patients suffering from SAD or even subsyndromal-SAD alongside conventional forms of treatment," The researchers concluded.⁸

Optimize Your Vitamin D Levels Through Sun Exposure

One lifestyle modification that wasn't included in the study above (but which I think is extremely important) is sun exposure, considering the lack of light is a primary driver of SAD.

People who live farther from the equator, or those in the northern latitudes, are more susceptible to developing SAD.⁹ This is because they're not getting enough sun exposure, especially during the winter months. When you expose your body to the UVB light from the sun, it produces vitamin D, a powerhouse nutrient that affects nearly every aspect of your health, including your mental well-being.

Studies have found that having low vitamin D levels is associated with heightened symptoms of anxiety and depression.¹⁰ For example, one meta-analysis published in January 2024 found that subjects who were given vitamin D supplements had reduced depressive symptom scores.¹¹

Hence, optimizing your vitamin D levels is one way to beat the winter blues. For optimal health, including mental health, you'll want a vitamin D level between 60 and 80 ng/mL (150 to 200 nmol/L), with 40 ng/mL being the lower cutoff for sufficiency. I suggest having your vitamin D levels tested to make sure you're in the optimal range.

If you live in the northern latitudes where sunlight is scarce during the winter months, another option is to take a vitamin D3 supplement to make sure you're meeting your recommended amounts. You'll also need to balance it with other nutrients, such as calcium, magnesium and vitamin K2.

However, vitamin D is just one reason sun exposure is crucial to beating the winter blues – in fact, the sun's benefits are far-reaching, as it actually awakens the essence of your biology. Just like how plants need sunlight to thrive, the human body has a mechanism that converts sunlight into cellular energy.

Being exposed to the beneficial red and near-infrared light from the sun is also essential to your cellular health – [this article](#) provides an insightful summary, but if you're highly interested in this topic, I recommend reading my new book, "Your Guide to Cellular Health," which goes into a detailed explanation on how sun exposure contributes to cellular energy production and helps transform your health at its very foundation.

SAD Is Linked to Your Circadian Rhythm

Another reason why sun exposure is crucial to your health is it helps regulate your body's circadian rhythm. It acts as an internal clock that governs your sleep-wake cycle. Exposure to bright sunlight in the morning and at solar noon helps to properly "set" your master clock.

However, when sunlight is lacking, such as during winter, your circadian rhythm is disrupted, which then triggers SAD. One essential part of this is melatonin. A hormone produced by your pineal gland, melatonin regulates your body's circadian rhythm.

Your master biological clock is found in your brain's suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN), which is part of your hypothalamus. Through signals of light and darkness, your SCN tells your pineal gland when it's time to secrete melatonin and when to turn it off.

As day turns into night, and it gets dark outside, your brain starts secreting melatonin (typically around 9 or 10 p.m.), causing you to become sleepy. Your levels typically stay elevated for about 12 hours. As the sun rises, your pineal gland reduces melatonin production, and your blood levels of this hormone decrease until it's hardly measurable.

However, people who have SAD have disrupted melatonin production; some overproduce this hormone, while in others, it's produced at the wrong time, either of which disrupts your circadian rhythm. According to the study, in people with SAD, "the circadian signal that indicates a seasonal change in day length has been found to be timed differently, thus making it more difficult for their bodies to adjust."¹²

Light Therapy Is Helpful for SAD

Light therapy is a well-recognized treatment for SAD. All you need to do is sit in front of a lightbox for about 30 minutes every morning. To emulate sunlight, the lightbox needs to have an intensity of 10,000 lux.¹³ Dr. Paul Desan of Yale University's Winter Depression Research Clinic says that light therapy is their first course of action for the winter blues.

"When we get patients on exposure to bright light for a half an hour or so every morning, the majority of patients get dramatically better. We don't even need medications," he adds.¹⁴

In fact, light therapy is now being considered a better option than antidepressant drugs. Aside from taking several weeks before the effects are felt, these medications also lead to bothersome side effects like nausea, weight gain and sexual dysfunction. According to an article from Harvard Health:¹⁵

"In people who respond well to light therapy, depression symptoms usually start improving within a week, and the side effects, which include eye strain and headaches, are uncommon and mild."

While there are findings saying that blue light is more effective than bright white light for SAD, remember that the benefits are only acquired if you get blue light in the morning and afternoon, but not in the evening. Blue light exposure in the evening negatively affects your sleep.

To be on the safe side, I recommend avoiding light therapy once the sun begins to set, to avoid further disrupting your circadian rhythm. The light intensity is also crucial – outdoor light is in the neighborhood of 10,000 lux, so this is the level of intensity you must strive for.

"Light therapy can be more effective when started early in the season, as it helps your body adjust gradually to shorter days and lower sunlight exposure, potentially reducing the onset or severity of symptoms," Budd says.¹⁶

Being Physically Active Helps You Shake Off the Winter Blues

When you have SAD, you might be tempted to just lie down and wallow in your sadness all day; however, this is the last thing you should do, as it will just worsen your anxiety and depression. Instead, stand up, move around and push yourself to be physically active. Ian Budd, a pharmacist for Chemist4U, says:¹⁷

"Engaging in regular physical activity is a natural way to lift your spirits and keep your body healthy. Exercise stimulates the release of endorphins, the body's 'feel-good' hormones, making it an ideal remedy for boosting your mood."

A 2024 meta-analysis published in the BMJ¹⁸ supports this, stating that exercise is an efficient treatment method for depression. The study authors noted that activities like walking, jogging, strength training and yoga are particularly effective; yoga and strength exercises were the most well-tolerated.

If the cold weather is particularly tolerable in your area, I recommend doing your exercise outdoors as it not only allows you to connect with nature, but also allows you to reap the benefits of sun exposure. One study¹⁹ noted that visiting blue and white spaces where you are able to connect to nature was linked to better mental health and a lower risk of turning to medications to ease depression. Even the simple act of gardening will have a profound impact on your mood.

Clean Up Your Diet

Your diet plays a fundamental role in both your physical and mental well-being; it's one factor that you must never overlook if you want to beat the winter blues. Making sure to get optimal amounts of certain nutrients will have therapeutic effects against depression.

Case in point – a 2024 study found that deficiencies in B vitamins (thiamin, niacin, riboflavin and folate), vitamin C and vitamin D are associated with depressive symptoms.²⁰ According to the researchers:²¹

"Over the past two decades, there has been an increasing recognition of the role of diet and dietary bioactive components as a significant modifiable risk factor in the prevention and treatment of the wide spectrum of mood disorders including depression.

Dietary nutrients, particularly certain vitamins, have shown promise in the prevention and improvement of depressive symptoms, regardless of individual self-efficacy and levels of physical activity."

While vitamin D is best obtained from sunlight, the other nutrients mentioned are easily acquired from a nutritious and balanced whole-food diet, consisting of fresh fruits, vegetables, healthy carbs and animal proteins. Another equally important factor is avoiding foods that trigger depression, and ultraprocessed foods must be the first to go.

A 2023 study published in the JAMA Network Open journal²² highlighted how consuming high amounts of ultraprocessed foods, especially artificial sweeteners and artificially

sweetened beverages, increases your risk of depression. According to the study authors:

"Recent experimental data suggests that artificial sweeteners elicit purinergic transmission in the brain, which may be involved in the etiopathogenesis of depression," the study authors said.²³

In addition, ultraprocessed foods are also loaded with vegetable oils and **linoleic acid (LA)**, which acts as a metabolic poison and, when consumed in excessive quantities, is the most destructive ingredient in your diet. Ideally, cut down your LA intake to below 5 grams per day, which is close to what our ancestors used to get. If you can get it below 2 grams, that's even better.

To add, it's best to refrain from getting intense sun exposure if you haven't eliminated or reduced your LA intake. If you're consuming high amounts of LA and you go out under intense sunlight, the unhealthy oils in your skin will oxidize and break down, causing inflammation and DNA damage. A telltale sign of this is sunburn. Hence, until you've eliminated LA for four to six months, limit your sun exposure to only early mornings and late afternoons.

Optimize Your Sleep

Lastly, making changes to your sleep routine profoundly impacts your mental state. Humans are designed to sleep when the sun sets and wake up when it rises. Straying too far from this biological pattern will disrupt your body's delicate hormonal cycles, affecting both your mood and your health.

When you're chronically sleep deprived, not only do you increase your risk of anxiety and depression, but you also become susceptible to chronic diseases like obesity, Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and osteoporosis. It also raises your risk for all-cause mortality. Hence, it's essential to adopt strategies that will ensure you get a good night's sleep, such as:

- **Sleeping in complete darkness (or as close to it as possible)** – Remove all light sources in your bedroom, and use blackout shades or drapes or wear an eyemask.
- **Keeping your bedroom temperature between 60 and 68 degrees F**, no higher than 70 degrees F.
- **Eliminating all electromagnetic fields (EMFs) from your room.**
- **Maintain a consistent bedtime routine.**

For more useful tips on optimizing your sleep, I recommend reading my article "[Top 33 Tips to Optimize Your Sleep Routine](#)." It provides a comprehensive list of guidelines that will help you get a good night's sleep every night, ward off the winter blues and keep you optimally healthy overall.

If you need extra guidance, I invite you to sign up for the Mercola Health Coach app, a revolutionary tool that will guide you on your journey to optimal health.

One of the perks of getting this app is the "Food Buddy" feature, which helps you identify toxic ingredients that could be dampening your mood. It also transforms and guides your food choices so that every eating decision you make becomes an opportunity to boost both your mental and physical health. This app is launching soon, so stay tuned.

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