

SEASONAL DEPRESSION

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What is seasonal depression?

With the coming of the fall season, many people experience changes in their appetite, weight, sleep pattern, mood, and energy level. This is a normal, short-lived occurrence, and is no cause for concern. Seasonal depression, which is also known as "seasonal affective disorder", is a more serious problem that requires specific attention. It is a form of recurring depression that appears at the same time each year.

It usually starts in the fall, often around the end of October, worsens in January or February, and generally ends in late April or May, as the days get longer. It is directly linked to a decrease in the number of hours of sunlight, and occurs most often in northern countries.

Seasonal depression affects approximately 2% to 3% of Canadians, and 70% to 80% of those who suffer from it are women. It occurs primarily among adults (a large proportion being in their 30s), but cases have also been seen among children and adolescents. In fact, 10% to 15% of people who suffer from recurring mood disorders (depression or bipolar disorder) are affected on a seasonal basis.

Warning signs

Some of the warning signs include changes in interpersonal relationships, increased irritability, a desire to be alone more often, a lack of energy for daily activities, a feeling of being less productive at work or in our other activities because of the lack of the energy, and reduced levels of concentration and motivation. If these symptoms return every fall or winter for at least two years and prevent a person from functioning at the usual pace, cause serious distress, and last until spring, it could be seasonal depression.

Symptoms

The symptoms of seasonal depression are as follows:

- A depressed mood most of the day and most days;
- A loss of interest and pleasure in activities that we usually enjoy;
- Increased appetite (often an irresistible craving for sweets and carbohydrates);

- Sleeping longer, difficulty getting out of bed in the morning, and lower energy levels;
- Decreased ability to concentrate, think, or make decisions;
- Feeling slow, or on the contrary, feeling agitated;
- Feeling guilty or worthless, or even thinking about death or suicide in certain cases.

In addition, because the signs of seasonal depression can easily be confused with the signs of major depression, it is important to know the actual triggers. The onset of depression or a relapse may occur during the fall without being considered a seasonal depression. The determining factor is the recurrence of the symptoms at the same time of the year.

Treatment

This disorder is caused by a reduction in daylight hours, and therefore, light therapy is one of the main treatments. The individual is exposed to light from a special lamp that

simulates natural daylight and that has a filter for harmful UV rays. In order to be effective, the lamp must produce at least 10,000 lux (equivalent to a sunny spring morning). The treatment should be administered in the morning, if possible, because doing in later in the day can make it harder to fall asleep.

The individual is exposed to this light for approximately 30 to 45 minutes every day, and can do other things at the same time (eat breakfast, read, etc.). If the depression is truly related to a lack of light, the person will usually notice a change within a week. Certain restrictions apply, primarily related to the health of the individual and any medications that he or she may be taking. Therefore, it is important to consult a doctor before starting any treatment.

On the other hand, psychotherapy can help you work on the thoughts, emotions, and behaviours that feed the depression. It can provide the support and the tools that you

need in order to get back into action. There are a number of different approaches that may be appropriate, depending on the needs of the individual, research supports the value of the cognitive-behavioural approach in particular. The bond of trust with the therapist and the feeling that he or she understands what you are going through are the most important factors in the success of the therapy.

In terms of medication, a doctor may prescribe antidepressants, which can help to restore energy and a more positive mood. These medications often lead to good results, but they must be taken for several weeks, or even months, in order to reach their full effect.

This type of depression is directly related to a lack of light, and therefore, taking a walk every day, especially in the morning, can help you to get through it. This also allows you to be physically active, which is another factor that helps to overcome depression.

Where to go for help

If you think you have seasonal depression and you want to know more about the available treatments, the first step may be to talk to your doctor. For psychological help, you can consult a psychotherapist who is recognized by a professional association, such as a psychologist or a social worker.

Finally, you can call Revivre's support, information and referral line, at 1-866-REVIVRE (1-866-738-4873) to find out how to rent or buy a light therapy lamp. You can also check with your pharmacy's prescription counter, because many pharmacies carry these products.

SUPPORT, INFORMATION, REFERRAL

514 REVIVRE (738-4873)

Toll free: 1 866 REVIVRE

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