What is SAD?

Whether you call them the winter blues or the winter blahs, the emotional symptoms that sometimes accompany shorter days and colder weather may be a sign of a more serious clinical condition known as seasonal affective disorder (SAD). SAD is similar to typical depression. However, unlike people with depression, people with SAD usually don’t have thoughts of hurting themselves (suicidal ideation) or feelings of worthlessness. Instead, people with SAD display the following symptoms:

- Sleepiness, carbohydrate craving, difficulty with concentration, boredom, depressed mood, irritability, weight gain, lethargy, decreased libido, and hyperphagia (increased consumption of food).
- Symptoms of SAD recur every winter and dissipate in spring or early summer. During winter, there is less sunlight and people are outdoors less. SAD is more prevalent in women than men, and this condition affects between 1 and 10 percent of people living in high altitudes.
- Light therapy or exposure to artificial ultraviolet light improves symptoms in about 50 to 80 percent of people affected by SAD. Such light can be delivered in several ways: light boxes, dawn simulators situated bedside, or light-emitting caps or visors. Finally, talk therapy may also be of benefit.

Vitamins for Seasonal Affective Disorder

Vitamin D

Vitamin D forms naturally within the body when your skin is exposed to the sun. As days shorten and daylight decreases, your vitamin D levels dip. For some patients, vitamin D supplements may improve SAD symptoms. Vitamin D is available for purchase in Student Health Services (SHS).

B Vitamins

Some B vitamins have been shown to play a role in protecting against depression, according to The New York Times. Vitamin B3, or niacin, plays a role along with the amino acid tryptophan in producing serotonin—the neurotransmitter targeted by many antidepressants. As such, dietary or supplemental niacin may be beneficial to SAD sufferers needing a mood booster. B3 is naturally present in salmon, mackerel, whole grains, dried fortified cereals, chicken, beans and dried peas. Vitamin B12 may help alleviate depression in women with premenstrual and postpartum depression, and it may play a role in helping patients with SAD. Formal studies have been inconclusive in regard to B12’s benefits in treating clinical depression. Folate, which is also a B vitamin, may elevate mood and boost the efficiency of prescription antidepressants. Vitamin B12 is also available for purchase in SHS.

Vitamin C

When used with bioflavonoids, vitamin C in supplement form may help reduce anxiety and elevate energy levels. Bioflavonoids are present in all plant foods, including citrus fruits. These compounds are anti-inflammatories and work to prevent damage from free radicals. They prevent oxidation of vitamin C, making it more effective and better absorbed. Vitamin C is available for purchase in SHS.

Minerals

Magnesium and calcium are essential to nervous system function, and magnesium in particular may alleviate symptoms of depression. If calcium intake is high, magnesium absorption and its effects may be compromised. Magnesium and calcium work hand in hand to maintain heart health and deliver nerve messages. Balance your intake of these minerals, ensuring that magnesium doesn’t compete with calcium. Magnesium is naturally present in whole grains, green vegetables, beans, fish and nuts. Sources of calcium include spinach, greens (turnip, collard, and mustard), Brussels sprouts, Swiss chard, kale, yogurt, milk and cheese.