

### **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)**

Have you ever wondered why you feel so down during the winter, reaching for chocolates whilst cuddled up in front of the telly? Even, in nature, animals are generally less functional during the winter months. Most of us feel more cheerful and energetic when the sun is shining, hence the mass exodus to sunnier countries in January and February. It is rare to find people with symptoms of SAD living within 30 degrees of the equator. Doctors in Sweden reckon SAD affects up to 20% of Sweden's 8.5 million people to some degree.

People with SAD experience seasonal changes of mood and behaviour. It is all due to the effects of light. The brain (hypothalamus) acts on light; the hypothalamus rules sleep, appetite, sex drive, temperature and mood. If there is not enough light these functions slow down. Serotonin, a neurotransmitter carrying messages to the brain, has been found to be low in depressed people and in winter. Also in the dark, more of the hormone melatonin is produced, which makes us sleep. People with SAD have been found to produce higher levels of melatonin in winter, their summer levels returning to normal.

Symptoms of the "winter blues" (sub-syndromal SAD) is a milder version of SAD. Common symptoms of SAD or winter blues include:

- A change in appetite, usually a craving for sweet or starchy foods
- Weight gain
- Low energy levels
- Fatigue
- A tendency to oversleep
- Poor concentration
- Irritability
- Avoidance of social opportunities

SAD is overlooked and often untreated. Bright light therapy has been known as the most effective treatment for most people. It basically means spending some time exposed to very bright light daily. The intensity of the light should be 10 times the intensity of domestic lighting. There is a wide range of light equipment available, including light boxes, visors and dawn simulators. Other treatments include, talking treatments (psychotherapy, cognitive behaviour therapy and counseling) and antidepressants.

There are also various basics that sufferers can help themselves with:

- Get outdoors and make use of natural daylight whenever you can
- Manage your stress by trying to plan ahead, avoiding major upheavals such as changing jobs, moving home, decorating and extra housework when you are a sufferer
- Remain physically active. Physical activity is vital for mental wellbeing
- Pamper yourself with massage or relaxation exercises
- St.Johns'wort is a popular herbal remedy available over the counter in the UK
- Keep an eye on your diet and eat regular and balanced meals. Cooked/hot meals are much more satisfactory than constant snacking on high carbohydrates and quick food.