

WHAT IS S.A.D?



MENTAL WELLBEING

Not to be confused with feeling sad, S.A.D is the acronym for Seasonal Affective Disorder – a type of depression that most often happens during the winter months, when the days are short, and you get less and less sunlight.

Unlike mild cases of feeling the winter blues, S.A.D symptoms make it difficult to function.

It has been described as starting with so-called “vegetative symptoms”: an increased appetite and a craving for stodgy carbohydrates, the urge to sleep longer hours, difficulty getting up in the morning and feeling wiped out at work.

If these symptoms continue for a few weeks then your overall mood can take a nosedive with persistent feelings of sadness, withdrawal from friends and family and a loss of interest in activities that were once enjoyable.

What can you do about it?



The exact cause of SAD isn't known but the main theory is that a lack of sunlight might stop a part of the brain called the hypothalamus working properly, which may affect the:

- **Production of melatonin** – the hormone that makes you feel sleepy; in people with SAD, the body may produce it in higher than normal levels
- **Production of serotonin** – serotonin is a hormone that affects your mood, appetite and sleep; a lack of sunlight may lead to

lower serotonin levels, which is linked to feelings of depression

- **Body's internal clock** (circadian rhythm) – your body uses sunlight to time various important functions, such as when you wake up, so lower light levels during the winter may disrupt your body clock and lead to symptoms of SAD

It's also possible that some people are more vulnerable to SAD as a result of their genes, as some cases appear to run in families.

Self-help lifestyle changes to consider



Get as much natural sunlight as possible



Exercise regularly, outdoors if possible



Work in bright conditions – for example, near a window or outside



Eat a regular healthy balanced diet



Make time for the things you enjoy



Reduce screen time



Get enough sleep



Manage your stress levels



Use a light box for 15-30 minutes a day first thing in the morning (where a special lamp is used to simulate exposure to sunlight, without the harmful effects of ultraviolet light)

When you need more help:



Chat to your GP about treatment and the use of antidepressant medicine like selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)



Explore talking therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or counselling



Make use of your employee assistance programme