

TREATING DEPRESSION AND SEASONAL EFFECTIVE DISORDER

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The winter months are often a difficult time to get through. The lack of sunlight in particular can put us in a state of hibernation causing us to experience fatigue, needing more sleep, weight gain and sometimes depression. Some people note that they clearly feel more depressed in the winter months and it occurs each year like clockwork. These people probably experience “seasonal effective disorder” of SAD, a type of major depression that begins in the fall and winter months and lifts in the spring and summer months.

There are many things that can be done to treat depression and SAD. It is particularly important to stay active during the winter. Exercise is a key to feeling well through the winter months. One study showed that exercise alone improved depressive symptoms in 50% of people. Walking, jogging, treadmill, biking, aerobic classes and weight lifting are all great ways to exercise. Doing group exercise is a great way to interact with others.

Getting as much light exposure as possible is also helpful in treating SAD. Opt to spend some of your lunch break outside walking if possible. UV light helps our brain to make needed chemicals to feel well. Another alternative in the dark winter months is using full spectrum light bulbs. These are available now at many markets. Using full spectrum lighting provides all types of rays from light needed to create an equal complement natural UV light. Some people find it very helpful to use light boxes. These are available from different companies. There are some boxes that can be put on desktops and others that simulate dawn and can be put in the bedroom. This helps people wake more easily and feel capable of getting up in the morning.

High dose B complex vitamins have been helpful for some in treating depression. The B complex vitamins are utilized in our energy producing pathways in our cells. This helps all cells to make more molecules involved in energy production and results in feeling more energetic and less depressed (depression is often fatigue of the brain).

The herb St. John’s Wort has been examined in dozens of studies for treating depression and SAD. St. John’s Wort has been shown to be as effective as many antidepressant drugs such as Prozac, Amitriptyline and imipramine, without producing the unwanted side effects. The success of St. John’s Wort in treating SAD and depression may stem from its ability to interact with multiple neurotransmitter systems in the nervous system. It has been shown to act on serotonin, dopamine, norepinephrine, GABA, MAO-A, and MAO-B systems. It also interacts with pro-inflammatory chemicals such as interleukins. It is best to use a standardized extract of St. John’s Wort

of 0.3% hypericins and to take 300mg three times daily. Consistency is important and the peak of the effect may take several weeks.

Another natural therapy for depression and SAD is omega-3 fatty acids. Blood cells were tested from patients with depression and they were found to be deficient in omega-3 fatty acids in most cases. Omega-3 fatty acids are needed for the proper production of nerve cells and the amount of omega-3 deficiency was correlated with the severity of depression. Omega-3 fatty acids can be found in fish, flaxseed, canola, walnut and other nuts and seeds. I prefer the use of cod liver oil (a good one should not taste fishy). Cod liver oil contains a good balance of the different types of omega-3 fatty acids. A recommended dose would be 2 – 3 teaspoons daily.

Increasing serotonin levels of the brain is one goal in treating depression. This is often achieved by the use of antidepressant drugs that block the re-uptake of serotonin into the nerve cell that produced it. This allows for more serotonin to be present in the junction or synaptic cleft of nerve cells where information sharing takes place between nerve cells. In addition to blocking serotonin re-uptake we can increase the production of serotonin by giving the precursor to serotonin, 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP). This is a form of the amino acid tryptophan. 5-HTP has been shown in a multitude of studies to equal the effect of many antidepressant drugs. We are able to balance many neurotransmitters by giving the amino acid precursor. I have found this to be effective in treating SAD, depression and anxiety. Please consult your primary care provider when considering self-administration of any supplements. This advice is not meant to substitute for treatment by a doctor for health care concerns.