An introduction to Seasonal Affective Disorder and its treatment for service users, carers and their families

What is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)?
SAD is a condition where those affected develop symptoms of depression at the same time every year. This most commonly occurs in the winter, usually developing between September and November and lasting through to March or April. The symptoms tend to be worse between December and February. Some people do experience seasonal depression in the summer. This is less common and has different features from that experienced during winter months. This fact sheet provides information about SAD experienced during winter months. SAD can develop at any age. It affects four times more women than men and usually first begins between the ages of 20 and 30. Although the exact cause is not clear it is thought that less sunlight in winter months changes the balance of chemicals and hormones in the body, which affects mood and triggers depression.

Those affected by SAD experience symptoms in common with other types of depression:
- Low mood nearly every day
- A loss of enjoyment and interest in life
- Abnormal sadness and or weepiness,
- Poor motivation or concentration
- Lacking in energy
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Physical symptoms: headaches, palpitations and general aches and pains

Those affected by SAD also tend to have less typical symptoms of depression too – they put on rather than lose weight, sleep more rather than having problems sleeping and some feel a heaviness in their limbs. Symptoms are severe enough to interfere with everyday life and this may cause difficulties at work and at home. SAD may not be diagnosed immediately as it may take time to observe that there is a seasonal pattern to the depression. The symptoms go abruptly in the Spring, without treatment, and some people develop great energy and creativity at this time. In a small number of case people may experience abnormally high or elated mood.
What are the signs?

*Common signs are:*
  - Reoccuring depression in the winter months
  - Symptoms clear in the spring
  - Craving for sweet things, increased appetite and weight gain
  - More sleepy and sleep more

What next?
Taking the first step and admitting that you are feeling depressed can be difficult but a range of support is available to help you.

Self help
Going far a walk every day during daylight hours can relieve the symptoms. Regular exercise, especially if done outside in the daytime, can also help. You can call a help-line or contact a self – help group, where people who have experienced SAD give mutual support and share experiences. Your GP can give you practical advice and support and may refer you for more specialist assessment and treatment.

Talking or psychological therapies
Talking and psychological therapies involve talking and listening. Therapists are trained to listen and help you find your own answers, without judging you. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is an effective treatment for SAD in which you work with a therapist to develop alternative ways of thinking and behaving. You can ask your doctor for talking therapies regardless of medication or other treatments. NHS talking therapies are free but they may not be available locally or there may be a waiting list. Some people find that talking therapies can be hard work and may raise painful emotions or memories, but over time many feel the benefits. Others find it provides a release and helps to talk.

Complementary therapies
These cover a range of treatments, some of which may provide benefits for those affected by SAD. Therapies include herbal remedies, yoga, reiki, Indian head massage, homeopathy and reflexology. It is important that you use a qualified practitioner. You should always discuss complementary treatments with your doctor; let them know if you are using any, and the results. Light therapy can improve symptoms in many cases. The treatment involves the use of a special light box, which has to be used every day. Light therapy only works if you have SAD but does not work for everyone affected by it. Light therapy appears to be safe, although there is a theoretical risk of damaging the retina. Some people experience side effects, including headaches, irritability, tiredness and difficulty sleeping after an evening therapy session. The NHS does not provide a light box on prescription.

Medication
Many people also find they benefit from medication. Anti depressant medicines are prescribed for all types of depression, including SAD. SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors) are thought to be more effective for treating SAD than other types of anti depressants. It can take time for their effect to build up and, when stopping, you may have to reduce the dose gradually. All medicines have specific risks or side effects attached to their use, which will be discussed with you before you...
consent to treatment. One or more treatment options may be combined to aid recovery.

All treatment can affect people in different ways and it is always best to talk to your doctor or relevant health professional about your own needs and the best treatment options for you.

FURTHER INFORMATION OR SUPPORT

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)
Elizabeth House, Fulbourn Hospital, Fulbourn, Cambs CB21 5EF; Tel: 0800 376 0775; email pals@cpft.nhs.uk. Provide information and advice about Trust services and support to resolve concerns

Royal College of Psychiatrists
17 Belgrave Square, London, SW1X 8PG
Tel: 020 7235 2351 ext 259; www.rcpsych.ac.uk
Produce information for the general public on common mental health problems and treatments

NHS Direct
Tel: 0845 4647; www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
Provide help and advice on all health topics

SAD Association (Seasonal Affective Disorder Association)
PO Box 989, Steyning, West Sussex, BN44 3HG
Tel: 01903 814942; www.sada.org.uk
Provide information, advice and support about SAD. Produces publications and has a network of contacts, a light box scheme and raises money for research into SAD.

Other fact sheets in the ‘More Insight’ series are available on www.cpft.nhs.uk or by contacting PALS.