

Winter Blues and You

Introduction

During the cold winter months, it is not uncommon for some people to experience “winter blues.” This is especially true for many senior adults as they use caution and do not venture out on days with questionable weather. What many people don’t know is that the winter blues is actually a mild depression brought on by a decrease in exposure to sunlight as autumn deepens.



Winter Blues and Seasonal Affective Disorder

Many individuals who suffer from the winter blues fall into a depressed mood each year in the fall and continue to feel depressed throughout the winter and into the early spring, when these feelings disappear. The winter blues are primarily caused by unstable melatonin levels, a hormone produced during sleep, and serotonin, a neurotransmitter responsible for mood, hunger, and sleep. As the days become shorter and the hours of sunlight decrease, sufferers of the winter blues experience changes in their mood, energy level, and ability to concentrate.

The winter blues has a more severe counterpart, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD is another type of depression that, like winter blues, is related to an access problem between the brain’s pituitary and hypothalamus glands caused by lack of sunlight. Individuals suffering from SAD should seek medical advice. About 6 percent of Americans have SAD, and another 14 percent have the winter blues.

Do You Have Winter Blues?

Although the winter blues are not as severe as long-term depression, they can change the way a person thinks, reacts, and deals with everyday challenges.

If you experience two or more of these symptoms each year in the fall and into the spring you may suffer from the winter blues:

- Increased feelings of lethargy
- Difficulty waking up in the mornings as the days get shorter
- Difficulty concentrating and thinking creatively in comparison to the summer months
- Incorrectly blaming oneself for things that go wrong
- Difficulty performing tasks that normally seem to be easy/enjoyable
- Increased craving for carbohydrate-rich food like chocolate and sodas

Treatment

There is no known way to prevent the development of winter blues, however, there are steps you can take to manage symptoms and keep them from getting worse over time.

Light Boxes

Multiple studies found that the majority of those suffering from the winter blues experienced relief solely from the regular use of "light boxes." Light boxes emit high intensities of light and produce similar effects to the sun's natural rays. The high intensities of light improve the mood of those suffering from the winter blues because they restrict the secretion of melatonin in the brain. These boxes are best used daily and in the early morning for periods of 30 minutes to two hours.

Exercise

Many studies show that aerobic exercise decreases feelings of depression in all age groups. Not only does aerobic exercise improve mood, but it has also been shown to reduce stress, which often exacerbates feelings of depression brought on by the winter blues. Exercising outside is beneficial, even on days with cloudy skies. Aerobic exercise rids winter blues sufferers from feelings of depression because it increases serotonin levels.

Food and Nutrition

Many people who suffer from the winter blues crave junk food and soft drinks as the days get shorter. High-sugar foods and carbohydrates are often effective in increasing serotonin levels in the brain, which decreases feelings of winter blues. A better strategy for anyone with the winter blues would be to eat larger portions of complex carbohydrates, like pasta and rice, and healthy simple carbohydrates like fruits and fruit juices. Try to resist the unhealthy snacks as, although they will cause momentary relief, they ultimately decrease energy.

Sleep Strategies

As one of the symptoms of winter blues is difficulty getting up in the morning, those suffering from the winter blues are often asleep when the morning sun is up and shining. This limits the number of hours that those with the winter blues are exposed to sunlight. Winter blues sufferers should make an effort to expose themselves to sunlight in the early morning, for example, take an early morning walk outside or open the curtains in your home as soon as you rise. Try to limit oversleeping and fluctuations in sleep-wake schedules as the increased levels of melatonin during sleep can contribute to feelings of depression. It is helpful to set a regular bedtime and wake up at the same time each day. In general, adults need eight hours of sleep a night. A good night's sleep will give you more energy during the day and reduce feelings of depression.

Medication

Some individuals who suffer from more severe cases of the winter blues might find that anti-depressant medicine, in conjunction with other forms of therapy, assist mood. Drugs which increase levels of serotonin by blocking re-uptake sites in the brain have proven effective with some patients. Before taking any medications, first speak to your physician.

References

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