



HEALTH & WELLNESS SPECIAL: Has winter made you SAD?

Posted By: [Steven Schelling](#) - 01/22/2009 12:00 AM

It may be small comfort considering the grizzled blanket of fog that's been smothering the city for almost a week at the time of this writing, but according to Environment Canada's website, there are 24 Canadian cities that receive less sunshine than Vancouver. Six of these are in B.C. — as if living in Prince Rupert (number one) or Chilliwack (number two) wouldn't already be depressing enough — with the balance dispersed across the country.

Nevertheless, a climactic penchant for soggy skies and leaden clouds, married with a healthy streak of postmodern victim-culture in Vancouver, ensures that the next several months will be marked by wistful sighs of discontent, forlorn pronouncements of doom, and general bellyaching about the crap weather and attendant lack of sunshine.

Self-diagnoses of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) are bandied about like punchlines, and for some, complaining is catharsis enough. But for others, winter's dying of the light awakens a series of symptoms that can prove difficult, if not seemingly impossible, to overcome.

So, the question you should ask is: "Just how SAD are you?"

Clinical depression

"In Canada, about one to three per cent of the population suffers from SAD," says Dr. Raymond Lam, Professor of Psychiatry at UBC and Director of UBC Hospital's Mood Disorder Centre.

The symptoms, like general lethargy, a need for more sleep, lack of focus, and an increased appetite (a more complete catalogue is available on the Mood Disorders Centre's website, [UBCSAD.ca](#)) read like a laundry list of mid-winter ailments that just about everyone has suffered at some point during a grey and unforgiving season. "But when we're talking about Seasonal Affective Disorder, we actually mean a subtype of clinical depression, where people have signs and symptoms that interfere with their function due to the severity and persistence of those symptoms."

According to Dr. Lam, treatments range from fluorescent-lightbox therapy, to cognitive behaviour therapy, to antidepressant medications, with St. John's wort showing effectiveness in mitigating clinical depression and, by association, SAD. People who think they might be suffering from SAD should first consult their family physician in order to rule out other conditions, such as a thyroid problem, that can cause similar symptoms. If those tests point to SAD, Dr. Lam and the Mood Disorders Centre are

currently holding clinical trials for new treatments, including the ‘light book,’ a smaller, more efficient light box that uses LED lights and high-density negative-ion therapy.

Winter blues

SAD’s milder, less chronic cousin, the “winter blues” or “winter blahs,” affects approximately 15 per cent of the population, with symptoms similar to SAD, but its feelings of generalized malaise don’t hinder a person’s everyday life. “It’s a fairly common disorder, especially in Vancouver,” says licensed naturopath **Dr. Aaron Hoo**, who encounters the illness frequently in his West End practice (www.DoctorsChoiceNutrition.ca). His advice to clients generally begins with exercise nutrition. “Exercise will improve endorphin production and improve sleep quality,” he advises. He also recommends patients increase their intake of Omega 3 fatty oils and vitamin D, with cold-water fish like salmon and tuna for the former, and milk and dairy products for the latter, as well as boosting those levels with professional formulation supplements. Phosphatidylserine, which is found in soy lecithin and contains both amino acids and fatty acid groups, can also be of help, and St. John’s wort has been shown effective in alleviating feelings of depression.

The rest of us

If you belong to the remaining 72 per cent of the population, who, like me, wallow in glorious apathy for the duration of the season, all is not lost.

Exercise, especially when you feel least inclined to do it, will perk up even the most dedicated couch surfer. Mark Deans, operations manager of Deserving Thyme Lifespa (Lifespa.ca), recommends anything that stimulates blood flow. “You’re less active at this time of year, and you’ve probably overeaten, making you feel even worse about your appearance,” he explains. “A relaxing or stimulating massage or pedicure can give you a new outlook and lift your spirits, with the added bonus that you come out with glowing and soft skin.”

Note that this article is not a substitute for medical consultation. Always consult a physician before beginning any form of treatment.

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Doctors’ Choice Nutrition – Dr. Aaron Hoo

1190 Thurlow Street, Vancouver, BC V6E1X3

Phone: 604-688-1169 Fax: 604-688-1176

www.doctorschoicenutrition.ca

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