

Do you find it hard to get up most mornings, do you crave carbohydrates and feel unlike your usual happy self?

If so, you're not alone. Seven per cent or more of the population suffers from the winter blues, also known as Seasonal Affective Disorder.

SAD is a type of winter depression that affects an individual between September and April but the symptoms are most prominent during December, January and February, and are believed to be caused by a biochemical imbalance in the hypothalamus due to the shortening of daylight and the lack of sunlight in the winter.

Nerve centres in our brain controlling our daily rhythms and moods are stimulated by the amount of light entering our eyes.

As night falls the pineal gland starts to produce a substance called melatonin that tells our body clock it's night time. Bright light at daybreak is the signal for the gland to stop producing this melatonin.

On dull winter days, especially when indoors, not enough light is received to trigger this waking up process. Therefore the shorter autumn days set off a chain of hormonal reactions starting in the pineal gland in the centre

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Eat yourself out of the winter blues

Later this month the clocks will go back an hour. It will mean we have to wake up in the dark - for sufferers of the winter depressive condition known as Seasonal Affective Disorder, it will mean can mean the start of months of misery. However, Bristol-based nutritionist Charlotte Turner says eating correctly can you to cope

of the brain, which responds to growing darkness by producing the hormone melatonin.

Light is also linked to serotonin a neurotransmitter in the brain, and the main chemical that improves mood.

Low serotonin can cause depression.

Evidence has shown that serotonin levels increase with exposure to bright light - and it can also be increased naturally in the body by how we think and what we eat.

The key to understanding the connection between the food we eat and our mood and level of alertness lies in understanding a little about how the brain functions.

The brain communicates by chemical substances passed

from one nerve cell to the next. These chemicals, called neuro transmitters, are made in the brain from the food we eat.

The neurotransmitters that are most sensitive to diet and influential in affecting mood

are serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine - and low levels of these transmitters heightens depressive symptoms.

It is well known that what we eat affects how we feel. Specific food directly affects



SAD symptoms and causes

Most people will be getting out of bed with a sigh after the clocks go back at the end of this month. But for sufferers of seasonal affective disorder (SAD) the darker days of winter bring far more serious symptoms, such as:

- Feeling down and depressed;
- Having less interest in doing things or delaying doing things;
- Loss of libido
- Over eating
- Waking up in the night
- Waking up too early
- More tired than usual, heavy limbs, aching muscles or headaches;
- Feeling tense, irritable, worrying too much about little things;
- Thoughts or speech are slow;
- Fidgety, restless, difficulty concentrating;
- Feelings of paranoid and suspicion.

Light therapy has been shown to be effective in up to 85 per cent of diagnosed SAD cases.

Exposure for up to four hours per day (average one to two hours) of very bright light at least ten times the intensity

of ordinary domestic lighting is beneficial. It is best to embark upon light therapy in early autumn when the first symptoms appear.

Some antidepressant drugs such as the non-sedative Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor (SSRI) are effective in alleviating the depressive symptoms of SAD and combine well with light therapy.

The SSRI's are a class of antidepressants that work by increasing the level of the neurotransmitter serotonin in the body.

Correct nutrition can also play an important role in helping SAD sufferers to cope with their condition.



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brain chemicals and what when we eat affects blood sugar levels, both of which play havoc with our moods.

Unfortunately, bad moods can affect our food choice, so vicious cycles can get set up contributing to the depression habit spiral.

Follow this advice to eat yourself happier:

Eat regular meals, especially breakfast.

Eating regularly is important, skip breakfast and blood sugar will drop and you will feel tired, hungry and lacking in concentration by mid morning. Eat three meals a day with a few healthy snacks in between and watch your energy levels and concentration improve.

Food cravings mean that the body has its signals mixed up. When we have low serotonin the body signals to the brain that it needs a pick me up causing a sugar/carbohydrate craving.

Refined carbohydrates and sugar release a short burst of serotonin, so we feel good for a moment but soon return to our low serotonin state - and then crave more sugar and simple carbohydrates, which causes a downward spiral.

Avoid using sugar as a boost.

Choose foods that have the ability to release their sugar content slowly such as the complex carbohydrates, oats, wholegrain bread and pasta. For optimum mind, body and health you need to eat a diet rich in fruit, vegetables, steady release carbohydrates and

tryptophan rich proteins.

Choose tryptophan and tyrosine rich proteins.

Tyrosine helps the body produce the mood-influencing chemicals serotonin and dopamine.

Because people who are depressed often have low levels of tyrosine, researchers have thought that tyrosine might help treat depression. Tyrosine is found in soy products, chicken, turkey, fish, peanuts, almonds, avocados, bananas, milk, cheese, yogurt, cottage cheese, lima beans, pumpkin seeds, and sesame seeds.

Serotonin, the main chemical that improves mood, is derived from tryptophan, which is found naturally in bananas, papaya,



HEALTHY EATING: Follow Charlotte Turner's advice

It is well known that what we eat affects how we feel

Charlotte Turner

dates, turkey, nuts, eggs and many protein rich sources.

Eating foods rich in Omega 3.

Numerous studies have shown that people who suffer from depression may benefit by eating a diet rich in Omega 3, which is an essential fatty acid and are found in food such as oily fish (sardines, mackerel, salmon) nuts and linseeds. The human body is unable to make Omega 3 which is another reason why this winter we should aim to increase our intake to ward off those winter blues.

Eat more foods rich in Vitamin D.

This vitamin is produced in the skin after exposure to ultraviolet light from the sun or artificial sources. Vitamin D can also be found naturally in a small range of foods such as eggs, oily fish, and milk, margarine and meats.

One theory of the cause of SAD is the link between low levels of Vitamin D due to lack of exposure to sunlight during the winter months. There is some evidence that low vitamin D levels may be connected to SAD.

Research has shown vitamin D appears to increase levels of serotonin in the brain which may help to relieve depressive symptoms.

The relationship between vitamin D, depression and the sun is not completely clear. Therefore, you should always consult your doctor before adding the supplements to your diet, as high levels of vitamin D could become toxic or interfere with other medications you are taking.

If you think you are suffering with SAD consult your GP. For more information and support contact the Seasonal Affective Disorder Association at www.sada.org.uk.

Charlotte Turner is a Bristol-based dietitian, with a degree in Dietetics from Kings College London. She

provides online nutrition advice for weight loss at www.turnertreatmentclinic.co.uk and can offer nutritional advice and a personalised diet plan tailored to SAD, as well as one to one consultations in Bristol.

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