Seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, is a type of depression that affects a person during the same season each year. If you get depressed in the winter but feel much better in spring and summer, you may have SAD. An estimated 10-20% of the population experiences a mild form of winter onset SAD with less daylight hours and less outdoor activities.

Anyone can get SAD, but it is more common in people who live in areas where winter days are very short or there are big changes in the amount of daylight in different seasons. More women are prone to SAD. People between the ages of 15 and 55 are most affected by SAD, but the risk of getting SAD for the first time decreases as you age. People who have a close relative with SAD seem to be at higher risk for developing SAD.

“Experts are not sure what causes seasonal affective disorder, but they think it may be caused by a lack of sunlight. Lack of light may upset your sleep-wake cycle and other circadian rhythms. It may cause problems with a brain chemical called serotonin that affects mood.” (webMD)

Some of the symptoms of SAD are loss of interest in your usual activities; feeling moody, sad, or anxious; eating and craving more carbohydrates such as bread and pasta; weight gain; and sleeping more or feeling drowsy during the daytime. Symptoms come and go at about the same time each year. For most people with SAD, symptoms start in September or October and end in April or May.

It can sometimes be difficult to determine non-seasonal depression versus SAD because many of the symptoms are the same. It is important to have your doctor evaluate you to diagnose SAD. Your doctor will want to know if you have been depressed during the same season and have felt better when the seasons changed for at least two years in a row. Your doctor will discuss if you have symptoms that often occur with SAD, such as being very hungry especially craving carbohydrates, gaining weight, sleeping more than usual, and if you have a close relative such as a parent, brother, or sister who has been diagnosed with SAD.

Often times, doctors will prescribe light therapy to treat SAD. There are two types of light therapy. Bright light treatment entails sitting in front of a "light box" for half an hour or longer, usually in the morning. Dawn simulation is a dim light that goes on in the morning while you sleep, and it gets brighter over time, like a sunrise.

Light therapy works well for most people with SAD, and it is easy to use. You may start to feel better within a week or so after you start light therapy. However, you need to continue with it and use it every day until the season changes. If you discontinue the light therapy, your depression may come back.

Other treatments that may help include antidepressants which can improve the balance of brain chemicals that affect our moods, counseling such as cognitive behavioral therapy which can help you become educated about SAD and learn how to manage
your symptoms, and the old standby of incorporating regular exercise into your daily routine. Being active during the day, especially in the morning, may help you have more energy throughout the day and ward off depression. Walking, swimming, or bike riding are excellent means of moderate exercise and have proven to improve a depressive state.

If your doctor prescribes antidepressants, be sure you take them as instructed. Do not stop taking them just because you feel better. This could cause side effects or make your depression worse. When you are ready to stop, your doctor can help you slowly reduce the dose to prevent problems.

Look for the “light” at the end of the tunnel to “fight” SAD!

Visit the Lehigh County intranet site to schedule your appointment at the Wellness Centre.