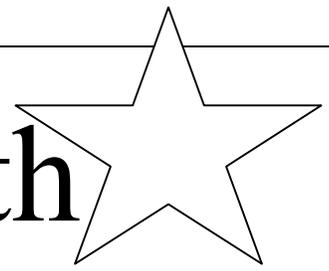


# To Your Health



VA Palo Alto Health Care System ★ Patient Education Newsletter ★ Winter 2002

## SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

Robyn Medcalf, LCSW\*\*

### *What is Seasonal Affective Disorder?*

As the winter approaches and the days get shorter, some people experience a form of depression called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)—an extreme case of the “winter blues” that is relieved during the spring and summer months.

Although SAD is not totally understood, it is a real illness with sometimes severe symptoms. As seasons change, there is a shift in our “biological internal clocks,” partly in response to the changes in sunlight patterns. This can cause our biological clocks to fall out of step with our daily schedules. For people with SAD, their bodies have a hard time adjusting to the shortage of sunlight in the winter months. SAD symptoms are most pronounced in January and February, when the days are shortest.

### *What are the symptoms?*

- Symptoms of depression occur regularly during the fall or winter months (changes in sleeping & eating habits; persistent sad, anxious or "empty" mood; loss of pleasure in activities once enjoyed).
- Depression subsides in the spring and summer months.
- The individual craves sugary or starchy foods.

### *Who gets SAD?*

Young people and women are at the highest risk for the disorder, but it can affect anyone. In fact, an estimated 25% of the population suffers from mild winter SAD, and about 5% suffer from a more severe form of the disorder.

### *What causes SAD?*

Melatonin, a sleep-related hormone secreted by the pineal gland in the brain, has been linked to SAD. This hormone is believed to cause symptoms of depression and is produced at increased levels in the dark. So when the days are shorter and darker, the production of this hormone increases.

*Continued on reverse side*

## ♥RECIPE FOR HEALTH♥

### Low-fat Banana-Nut Bread

from [www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)

### Ingredients

- |                          |                              |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 C mashed ripe bananas  | 2 C sifted all-purpose flour |
| 1/3 C low-fat buttermilk | 1 tsp baking powder          |
| 1/2 C packed brown sugar | 1/2 tsp baking soda          |
| 1/4 C margarine          | 1/2 tsp salt                 |
| 1 egg                    | 1/2 cup chopped pecans       |

### Directions

- 1) Preheat oven to 350°F. Lightly oil two 9X5-inch loaf pan.
- 2) Stir together mashed bananas and buttermilk; set aside.
- 3) Cream brown sugar & margarine together until light. Beat in egg. Add banana mixture; beat well.
- 4) Sift together flour, baking powder, baking soda, & salt; add all at once to liquid ingredients. Stir until well blended. Stir in nuts and turn into prepared pans.
- 5) Bake for 30 minutes, or until the top is shiny and a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean.

*Yield: One loaf—Serving size: 1/2-inch slice*

### *Per serving:*

Calories 133	Protein 1g	Total fat 5g
Sodium 138mg	Cholesterol 12mg	Saturated fat 1g

## SLEEP HYGIENE TIPS

Perrin French, MD

- ✓ **Avoid naps**, except for a brief 10-15 minute nap eight hours after arising; but check with your physician first because in some sleep disorders, naps can be very beneficial.
- ✓ **Get regular exercise** each day, preferably 40 minutes per day of an activity that causes sweating. It's best to exercise early in the day or at least 6 hours before bedtime.
- ✓ **Do not smoke** to get yourself back to sleep, or give up smoking entirely.

*Find more great tips on the back page!*

## INSTANT INFORMATION ON ANY TOPIC!

Perrin French, MD

I have been very impressed with the speed and quantity of information on almost any topic one can get by using "search engines" on the Internet. I recommend it to other clinicians in their efforts to help our patients, and I recommend its use to patients directly. Hardly a day goes by without my interrupting a conversation with a patient or colleague to say, "Let's find that out right now!"

We could be talking about how to locate a group of people who suffer from dyslexia, diabetes, recent loss of a loved one, or some other problem, and who meet for information sharing and support. We could be talking about how to find the way to the nearest VA Outreach Clinic. We could be talking about a new treatment or a job skill a veteran has or wishes to acquire.

A search engine is a way to find something on the Internet. By typing in a few key words on a topic, references appear almost instantly. I click on the most promising from the list to bring up maps, phone numbers, or entire articles.

### Popular search engines

Yahoo: [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)  
Google: [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

Now here is the hard part. Anyone can put almost anything on the Internet, so one must be cautious about the accuracy of the information. If it is being put out by a legitimate source (e.g., the American Dietetic Association, the US Food and Drug Administration, the VA itself, etc.), its chances of reliability are good.

### Accurate free health sites

Cancernet: [www.cancernet.nci.nih.gov](http://www.cancernet.nci.nih.gov)  
MedlinePlus: [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)  
Healthfinder: [www.healthfinder.gov](http://www.healthfinder.gov)

Security and patient privacy concerns prevent us from offering Internet access to patients here at the PAVAHCS. If you do not have a computer at home, check your local library. Many libraries offer free Internet access. Happy searching! ★



*Sleep tips continued...*

- ✓ **Avoid caffeine** entirely (caffeine consumed in the morning may still be at detectable levels in blood stream at bedtime).
- ✓ **Do not eat or drink** heavily for 3 hours prior to bedtime. A light bedtime snack may help.
- ✓ **Keep your room dark**, quiet, well ventilated, and at a comfortable temperature throughout the night. Earplugs and eyeshades are ok.
- ✓ **Use bedroom only for sleep**; do not work or watch TV before going to bed. ★

*SAD continued...*

### *Is treatment available?*

Yes. People do not need to wait for the spring months to overcome SAD. For mild symptoms, spending time outdoors during the day or arranging homes and workplaces to receive more sunlight may be helpful. Regular exercise, particularly if done outdoors, may help because exercise can relieve depression.

For more severe symptoms, a light treatment called phototherapy might help. Phototherapy has been shown to suppress the brain's secretion of melatonin. Although research has not proven that this treatment has an antidepressant effect, it has helped many people. The device most often used today is a light box that emits very bright light through a filter. SAD patients sit in front of the light box for a few minutes everyday while they work or do other activities. If phototherapy does not work, an antidepressant drug may help reduce or eliminate SAD symptoms, but there may be unwanted side effects to consider.

*In all cases, people who think they may have SAD should discuss their symptoms with a doctor or mental health professional. ★*

\*\*This information was extracted from a fact sheet courtesy of the National Mental Health Association.

***To Your Health is published quarterly for VPAHCS veterans and their families.***

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