Beat winter blues
Keep a rosy outlook
Jonathan Prousky, ND

Do you feel sad during the winter months and then feel better in the spring and summer? Do you find work less enjoyable as the days become shorter and the nights become longer? Have you been less sociable lately? Are you sleeping more than you should? Having excessive carbohydrate cravings? >
If you answered yes to the majority of these questions, you might be suffering from the winter blues, a less severe form of seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

SAD is characterized by fall and winter depression, excessive sleep (hypersomnia), increased appetite with carbohydrate cravings, and weight gain, which alternates with normal moods and behaviour in the spring and summer.

Even though the winter blues is a lesser form of SAD, it can be debilitating. Without effective treatment many people find their day-to-day life unsatisfying and difficult to manage.

There is an increased prevalence of the winter blues in areas of Canada that have a high proportion of rainy and overcast fall and winter days, affecting about 10 percent of the population.

FIND THE CAUSE
The condition might be caused by a deficiency of bright light, leading to circadian rhythm disturbances. Our natural circadian rhythm helps us to feel sleepy at night and awake during the day. Sufferers of the winter blues have a disrupted circadian rhythm that causes them to feel sleepy during both night and day.

Low levels of serotonin might also contribute to the winter blues. Serotonin is a feel-good brain chemical that has antidepressant, anti-anxiety, and anti-craving properties. It is speculated that sufferers have low serotonin levels during the winter months. Although more research is needed, increasing the brain level of serotonin has been shown to improve winter blues’ symptoms.

What can you do to help yourself? See your health care practitioner and rule out low thyroid function (hypothyroidism), anemia, blood sugar disturbances, and viral infection. Your health care practitioner should also inquire about seasonal depression and other symptoms.

BEAT THE BLUES
There are natural approaches that can provide substantial relief in a relatively short period of time.

Turn up the light
Try to get as much bright light as possible, particularly in the morning. This can be accomplished by purchasing a light visor or a light box. The device should provide broad spectrum light, as this is very similar to natural light, and deliver 2,500 to 10,000 lux of illumination. (Outdoor light half an hour after dawn is approximately 10,000 lux).

It generally takes from two days to a week to notice a great improvement. It is best to use these devices in the morning, as this has the added bonus of resetting
5-HTP DOSAGE

> Start with 50 to 100 mg three times a day.
> Increase to 200 mg three times a day if there are no noticeable changes within 4 to 6 weeks.

the circadian rhythm and stopping daytime melatonin secretion.

Get outside

Hibernation may be tempting, but get outdoors to take advantage of any natural light that Mother Nature offers. Remember to warm up properly before exercising. Tight muscles are more susceptible to injury in the cold.

Layer your clothing so the innermost layer wicks moisture away from your body while the outer layer provides a wind- and water-repellant barrier. Don’t remove your clothes immediately upon returning indoors. Allow your body time to adjust to the warmer temperature to avoid post-exercise hypothermia.

If exercising outdoors in the winter chill is unappealing, walk at a mall, climb stairs, join a gym, swim at an indoor pool, skate at an arena, or sign up for one of the many fitness programs offered by your local community centre.

Raise your serotonin

A dietary supplement called 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP) raises serotonin levels in the brain and is capable of alleviating many of the symptoms that characterize the winter blues.

When using 5-HTP it is wise to be monitored by a health care practitioner. Side effects from 5-HTP are minimal, but can include hypomania, mild nausea, vomiting, heartburn, and other gastrointestinal problems, such as flatulence, feelings of fullness, and stomach rumbling sensations.

Over the past 10 years, I have treated hundreds of patients with mood-related issues, including the winter blues. In the majority of cases, the use of natural treatments has successfully improved their quality of life.

Jonathan Prousky, ND, is chief naturopathic medical officer of the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine. His private practice focuses on the naturopathic treatment of mental health disorders.
Copyright of Alive: Canadian Journal of Health & Nutrition is the property of Alive Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.