

What are the Winter Blues?

Those suffering from the winter blues **fall into a depressed mood each year in the fall and continue to feel depressed throughout the winter** and into the early spring, when these feelings disappear. The winter blues and its more severe counterpart, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), affects about four times as many women as men. Nearly 25% of all college students across the United States suffer from the winter blues and this percentage increases at higher latitudes or more cloudy areas.

The winter blues are primarily caused by unstable melatonin levels, a hormone produced during sleep, and serotonin, a neurotransmitter responsible for mood, hunger, and sleep. As the days become shorter and the hours of sunlight decrease, sufferers of the winter blues experience changes in their mood, energy level, and ability to concentrate. Although the winter blues are not as severe as long-term depression, they can change the way a person thinks, reacts, and deals with everyday challenges.

Do You Have the Winter Blues?

If you experience two or more of these symptoms each year in the fall and into the spring you may suffer from the winter blues:

- Increased feelings of lethargy
- Difficulty waking up in the mornings as the days get shorter
- Difficulty concentrating and thinking creatively in comparison to the summer months
- Incorrectly blaming oneself for things that go wrong
- Difficulty performing tasks that normally seem to be easy/enjoyable
- Increased craving for carbohydrate-rich food like chocolate and sodas

Exercise and its benefits for the blues

Aerobic exercise has proven to help students combat feelings of the blues in the winter. Not only does aerobic exercise improve mood, but it also **has been shown to reduce stress**, which often exacerbates feelings of depression brought on by the winter blues. Studies had pointed out that one hour doing aerobic exercise outside (even with cloudy skies) had the same benefits as 2.5 hours of light treatment indoors. Aerobic exercise rids winter blues sufferers from feelings of depression because it increases serotonin levels. Briskly walking to classes, taking a run, skiing, sledding and having a snowball fight have all been proven to help sufferers of the blues feel better.

Diet: What to Eat and Why

Many people who suffer from the winter blues crave junk food and soft drinks as the days get shorter. The reason they want to indulge in high-sugar foods is because **carbohydrates are often effective in increasing serotonin levels** in the brain. A better strategy for anyone with the winter blues would be to eat larger portions of complex carbohydrates, like pasta and rice, and healthy simple carbohydrates like fruits

and fruit juices during meals, and stay away from unhealthy snacks that will cause momentary relief, but ultimately decrease energy.

Sleep Strategies that Help

Because many students tend to go to sleep late and wake up late, those suffering from the winter blues are often asleep when the morning sun is up and shining. This sleep-wake schedule limits the number of hours that those with the winter blues are exposed to sunlight. **Winter blues sufferers should make an effort to expose themselves to sunlight in the early morning.** Take a walk outside or lift the curtain in your room as soon as you rise. Also, try to limit sleep to 8-hour periods on a regular schedule. Oversleeping and fluctuation in sleep-wake schedule causes increases in levels of melatonin during sleep, which can contribute to feelings of depression. Set a regular bedtime and wake up at the same time each day. This will give you more energy during the day and reduce feelings of depression.

Resources

[National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#)

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[Web MD.](#) Keyword Search: Winter Blues;

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