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## Health news

# Low sunlight induces depression

Treatments are available for University students who experience Seasonal Affective Disorder

By Sarah Skidmore  
*Oregon Daily Emerald*

It's just the blues; it's the weather; you'll get over it.

For many people, depression can be much more prevalent during the winter months. Seasonal Affective Disorder, commonly known as SAD, affects many people during the seasonal decrease of natural light, according to the Mental Health Association.

"You leave for class, and it is dark; and then you spend all day under fluorescent lights, which aren't as bright as outside; and then you go home, and it is usually dark. It really affects some people," said Jerome Vergamini, psychiatrist at the Student Health Center.

People with SAD show signs of depression only during the autumn and winter seasons, but usually feel fine during summer months, according to the University of British Columbia Mood Disorders Clinic.

Vergamini said he traditionally begins to see patients with SAD beginning in late September or October.

"The symptoms are somewhat similar to those of animals in hibernation — many people just want to hide away," Vergamini said.

Symptoms include extreme fatigue or lack of energy, excessive sleeping, eating more carbohy-

### Symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder

- fatigue
- lack of energy
- excessive sleeping
- weight gain
- irritability
- listlessness
- consuming more carbohydrates than normal

drates than normal, weight gain, irritability and listlessness, he said.

Some students notice a change of attitude and behavior during the winter.

"I definitely sleep a lot more. It is kind of depressing. You get up when it is dark, and you go to sleep when it is dark," said Raymond Crosiar, a sophomore majoring in political science.

The causes for SAD are not entirely determined. Most researchers agree that it is the result of fewer daylight hours. For this reason, there is a higher incidence of SAD in Northern countries like Canada, according to the UBC clinic.

Another factor is melatonin. Melatonin is produced only during absence of light and is a sleep-related hormone produced in the brain, according to the National Mental Health Association.

If you have SAD, you can cheer up — there are treatments available. Light therapy is one tool used to help those who suffer from SAD. The light is extremely bright and is used in regulated doses to cause the body to be convinced it is getting enough sunlight.

For milder symptoms, the National Mental Health Association recommends spending time outdoors during the daylight. One study has shown that walking for an hour in winter sunlight is as effective as two and a half hours of artificial light.

"In the summer, I can go out and have a good time outside. Otherwise, I am stuck inside; it is kind of depressing," said Lauren Parfitt, a University junior majoring in German.

Large boxes that emit intense amounts of light are available at the University health center for a trial basis. Students must be reviewed by the psychiatric staff before becoming a candidate for the light box program.

After being diagnosed, students are allowed to try the light boxes at the health center for one week to test their effectiveness. If they find it helpful, the University has ties with a distributor, allowing students to buy the lights at a discounted rate, which costs less than \$300, Vergamini said.

Anti-depressant drugs can also be used to treat SAD. Some students who do not want to spend the time or money on the lights choose this option, Vergamini said.

"I have seen some people very, very disabled," Vergamini said. "They can't get out of bed and can't go to class. Others get sort of down but manage to muddle through."

Everyone who is significantly depressed should be assessed by a doctor, according to the UBC clinic.

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