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WITH DARKER days upon us many people can struggle with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Here menopause and hormones expert Claire Snowden-Darling, Head of The College of Functional Wellness and founder of kinesiology clinic, Balanced Wellness, has some timely advice.

Seasonal affective disorder is a type of depression that's related to changes in seasons. It usually starts in the autumn and continues through the winter, stopping when spring arrives.

Symptoms can include feeling depressed most of the day, nearly every day, losing interest in activities you once enjoyed, having low energy and apathy, and problems with sleeping or oversleeping.

You may also experience changes in your appetite, such as an increased desire for carbohydrates, weight gain, feeling sluggish or agitated and difficulty concentrating.

For those who experience SAD intensely these symptoms can also include feeling hopeless, worthless, or guilty and even having frequent thoughts of death or suicide.

Whilst the specific cause of SAD is still unknown the main issues seem to revolve around the change in circadian rhythms due to the reduced level of sunlight. This in turn reduces the amount of serotonin we make. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that modulates mood and the drop in this chemical can cause depression. This also causes a change in the amount of melatonin we make. Melatonin is our

sleep hormone, and the imbalance can mean we are more fatigued.

What can I do about it?

Light therapy Using a full spectrum light box is very effective for SAD. These are available online and range in price. Using a light box for 20 minutes a day can be very effective at minimising symptoms. The full spectrum light mimics sunlight without the UV. It is not recommended for people using photosensitising medication such as antipsychotics and phenothiazines. Potential side effects for others may include headaches, eye strain, and blurred vision.

Exercise Research investigating the impact of light therapy and aerobic exercise on symptoms of SAD found that 20 minutes of pedalling on a stationary bike was as effective as light therapy in producing a significant reduction in symptoms. Furthermore, it is suggested that regular exercise can increase serotonin levels in the brain. Timing is important here. For those with SAD it is better to exercise in the morning rather than the evening to avoid any conflict with the production of melatonin, our sleep hormone.

Take a Vitamin D supplement When we are exposed to sunlight our body makes Vitamin D. When we have less exposure to sunlight, we make less vitamin D and a deficiency has been associated with clinically significant depressive symptoms. Check with your GP or healthcare provider to make sure that Vitamin D is safe for you to take. If so, the most absorbable form is Vitamin D3.

Get out in nature! Even if the sun isn't shining, getting out in the fresh air and into nature is helpful as it has been proven to reduce our stress hormone cortisol and help us relax.

Eat protein It is essential that we eat carefully. Avoiding processed foods, linked to low mood, is important. The best thing we can do is make sure every meal has a good quality protein source and fats such as butter and olive oil alongside our green leafy veg.

Carefully 'curate' your environment If you are struggling with low mood, it is essential to create boundaries around what you let into your mind. It is essential to focus on self-care and positive influences. If it doesn't feel good, then don't do it! Read a good book, watch things that inspire you or make you laugh and spend time with people who elevate you and don't drain you.

When to see a doctor

It's normal to have some days when you feel down. But if you feel down for days at a time and you can't get motivated to do activities you normally enjoy, see your doctor. This is especially important if your sleep patterns and appetite have changed, you turn to alcohol for comfort or relaxation, or you feel hopeless or think about suicide.

■ For more information on Claire Snowden-Darling, her approach, and programmes visit: (www.claresnowdon-darling.com).

