

Dr. Stoff Explains Causes of Depression Among the Elderly

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This question from S.R. in Tuckahoe: Thank you for [the information about SAD](#), but my grandma seems to have SAD all of the time. Any thoughts?

Seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, is a mood disorder that predictably happens at about the same time every year.

Typically it begins in the late fall and continues through the winter and is related to the decreasing amount of sunlight and its effect on the production of various brain hormones, particularly serotonin. If someone is sad all of the time, then they don't have SAD but could be sad for a myriad of other reasons.

Symptoms like:

- difficulty concentrating, remembering details and making decisions
- fatigue and decreased energy
- feelings of guilt, worthlessness and/or helplessness
- feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism
- insomnia, early-morning wakefulness or excessive sleeping
- irritability, restlessness
- loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable, including sex
- overeating or appetite loss
- persistent aches or pains, headaches, cramps or digestive problems that do not ease even with treatment
- persistent sad, anxious or "empty" feelings

are all classical signs of depression. If, this sounds like your grandma then it is important that she see a mental health professional because left untreated not only is her quality of life negatively impacted but she could become suicidal. Therefore, treating depression isn't a do-it-yourself-at-home kind of thing but should be taken seriously.

As we age our production of hydrochloric acid in our stomach decreases, which makes it harder to digest and absorb some important nutrients. Furthermore, the accumulated effects of the "wear and tear" of life begin to take their toll, again increasing our need for many different nutrients.

In the recently published article "The effect of low-dose omega 3 fatty acids on the treatment of mild to moderate depression in the elderly: a double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled study," it was again demonstrated how important good nutrition is. They reported that just a small daily intake of fish oil containing only 300 mg each of EPA and DHA can have useful effects against depression in the elderly population.

Now that winter seems to be finally abating, go with your grandma for long and regular walks, the exercise and sun exposure will do you both good, make sure she is eating a broad and varied diet with a good daily multivitamin and include some fish oil in her supplements. In our office we use the Metagenics brand of fish oil because of its purity and mild taste.

[Send in your questions](#) and be well.