The SAD Season

by Ann Quasarano

As the long, leisurely days of summer come to a close, you may find yourself feeling a bit blue. Combine that with the prospect of getting back into a dull day-to-day routine with nothing to look forward to except more “to do” lists, and you might begin to feel overwhelmed by the prospect of it all! You may begin to feel depressed and lethargic, and crave starchy or sweet foods resulting in weight gain. Some suffer from sleep problems and mood swings; a few even complain of loss of libido. Whatever you call it, stress, winter blues or nervous tension, the symptoms are real.

Seeking the Light of Day
For Your Blood Type

Some people, particularly women, suffer from clinical winter blues, sometimes referred to as Seasonal Affective Disorder, or more aptly, SAD. As seasons change, there is a shift in our internal biological clock, or circadian rhythm. This occurs partly due to sunlight changes. This can cause our biological clocks to be out of sync with our daily schedules. The lack of vitamin D producing sunlight, may account for our feeling more stressed and tired. Another theory links SAD to the hormone melatonin. Melatonin is a sleep-related hormone secreted by the pineal gland in the brain and it is produced at increased levels in the dark. Theoretically, when the days are shorter and darker, more melatonin is produced.

Doctor Peter D’Adamo, author of Eat Right for Your Type, also finds that your blood type plays a role in the way your body responds to stress. According to Dr. D’Adamo, each of the four human blood groups (O, A, B, AB) is genetically programmed to respond to stress in a unique way. He explains, “Type O is susceptible to prolonged stress and the build up of adrenaline; this can lead to adrenal-neurological exhaustion.
Type A tends to produce an excess amount of the hormone cortisol, which can lead to weight gain, sleep problems and feelings of anxiety. Blood types B, and AB are in the middle — with B being more ‘A like’ in their stress response and AB being more ‘O like’ in their reaction to stress.” To relieve stress and depression, Dr D’Adamo recommends exercise, which releases endorphins that alleviate stress and depression. However, he cautions, “If you exert yourself beyond your level of tolerance, exercise can actually act as a stressor. Many factors interact to determine your tolerance for exercise.”

Doctor D’Adamo recommends exercise that complements your body’s natural responses to stress, e.g. type O individuals should engage in exercise that burns off excess adrenaline — running, cycling and aerobic exercise fit that profile. People with blood type A should perform calming exercise that does not raise, but lowers, cortisol levels — yoga, pilates and walking are good options. Type Bs, he says, have a remarkable ability to reduce stress through meditation and visualisation. Exercises that have a meditative effect such as the martial art Tai Chi and Qi Gong are perfect for those individuals. Type ABs, he says, have a tendency to build up higher levels or noradrenaline and adrenaline during stress and have overall lower levels of the enzyme MAO, which can lead to an imbalance of the neurochemical, dopamine. For ABs he recommends a blend of both aerobic exercise, to eliminate the excess adrenaline, balanced by daily stretching, yoga or meditation.

Overeating, and eating the wrong foods will not only result in weight gain, but will jam up your digestive system as well, causing you to feel sluggish and out of balance. During the winter months, he recommends wild-caught salmon, cod and sardines, all richly oiled fish that are high in vitamin D and urges people of all blood types to continue eating vegetables and to keep their portions small.

Phototherapy or bright light therapy is often recommended as a treatment for SAD. It’s been shown to suppress the brain’s secretion of melatonin and increase the body’s production of vitamin D. Light therapy, which involves sitting in front of a specially designed light box for a designated period of time each day, hasn’t officially been approved as a seasonal affective disorder treatment because of mixed evidence about its effectiveness. But for some people, light therapy has shown to be helpful in alleviating the symptoms of the disorder. There are various types of light boxes for home use available for purchase in stores or over the internet. But before plunking down your hard earned cash for one of these items, you should talk to your health practitioner about the best one for you. For mild “winter blues” symptoms, you may be better off bundling up and spending more time outdoors. One study found that an hour’s walk in winter sunlight was as effective as two and a half hours under bright artificial light. Used frequently in traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture has also been shown to relieve feelings of stress, anxiety and depression. According to Chinese medical theory, energy flows through our body through a network of “roads”, almost like a highway system. Stress, anger or any intense emotion acts like a traffic jam, blocking the free flow of energy in the body. Acupuncture points serve as the on and off ramps to the energy highway, and can help energy flow smoothly, and alleviate not only the symptoms of stress and anxiety, but the stress and anxiety itself. From a Western viewpoint, acupuncture works to alleviate stress by releasing natural pain-killing chemicals in the brain, called endorphins. In addition, acupuncture improves circulation of blood throughout the body, which oxygenates the tissues, and cycles out cortisol and other waste chemicals. The calming nature of acupuncture also decreases heart rate, lowers blood pressure and relaxes the muscles — all without any unwanted side-effects.

For some people stress and feelings of depression can be overwhelming and all consuming. If it gets to that point, seeking the advice of a health care professional is your best course of action. The symptoms of stress and SAD are our bodies’ way of letting us know that there are situations that need to be attended to. Discussing those symptoms with your doctor or your health professional can be the first step towards the light of wellness.