

Supporting families: Sundowning

Nearly 20% of people living with Alzheimer's disease or other kinds of dementia experience sundowning, a group of symptoms that occurs as the sun starts to go down. Symptoms of sundowning include confusion, anxiety, restlessness, and agitation. These can last a few hours or the entire night, which may prevent your loved one from sleeping well. It may also lead to pacing or wandering.

Due to the stress it puts on caregivers, sundowning is a common cause of caregiver burnout. Symptoms typically peak during the middle stages of Alzheimer's.

The causes of sundowning are not known or well understood. Some research suggests that it may occur due to changes in the brain, which affect a person's circadian rhythm. Other issues that may increase the risk for sundowning include pain, constipation, hunger, thirst, multiple medications, infection, or disruptive sleeping environment.

Tips for reducing sundowning

Schedule. Try to adhere to a predictable routine for your loved one.

- Schedule challenging tasks or activities, such as doctor appointments, trips, and bathing, in the morning or early afternoon hours.

Activity. Being more active during the day may help your loved one sleep better at night.

- Discourage daytime naps unless your loved one rises very early. If that's the case, a morning nap may help with fatigue-related issues in the afternoon. Keep naps short, if they are taken.
- Encourage exercise, like walking.
- Encourage hobbies that get your loved one up and moving. Try playing your loved one's favorite genre of music or looking at old photos that can stimulate happy memories.

Meals/healthy diet. Modifying foods/beverages throughout the day may offer some relief.

- Limit caffeine and sugar to the morning hours or eliminate altogether. Switching to decaf coffee may be beneficial.
- Reduce or eliminate alcohol and nicotine.
- Keep evening meals and snacks light before bedtime.
- Drinking chamomile tea before bed can be relaxing.

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Lighting. Exposure to bright lights, like the sun, during the day may reduce some sundowning symptoms, especially when used in combination with exercise, like walking.

- Open the drapes in your house during the day and close them as the sun starts to set.
- Turn on lamps in the evening; this may help eliminate confusing shadows.

Bedtime. Creating a calm environment in the bedroom can be soothing and help induce sleep.

- Keep the bedroom quiet.
- Reduce background noise and avoid electronics before bed.
- Try aromatherapy plug-ins or diffusers. Lavender and vanilla are scents known to be calming.
- Use a red night-light in the bedroom or nearby bathroom. The red bulb may help to reduce agitation that occurs when surroundings are dark or unfamiliar but won't interfere with REM sleep.

If sleep disturbances continue, you might want to ask your physician about the benefits of melatonin for your loved one.

Calm reassurance. If your loved one experiences confusion, it is best to gently and patiently reorient them to where they are and what time it is. Avoid arguing, and offer reassurance that they are OK. If you notice that your loved one has certain triggers, write them down and share them with your family. Avoid those triggers at all costs in evening hours.

Sources:

www.webmd.com/alzheimers/guide/sundowning-causes-symptoms-treatments

www.alz.org

www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/alzheimers-disease/expert-answers/sundowning/faq-20058511