

## Late Day Restlessness

### Identifying the triggers and some coping strategies

People with dementia may become more confused, restless, or insecure late in the afternoon or early evening. It can occur at any stage of the disease, but it tends to peak in the middle stages of dementia and lessens as the disease progresses. Late day restlessness, sometimes referred to as sundowning, often affects the person's quality of life and it can be exhausting for the caregiver.

#### Some behaviour changes that may occur

Typically, behaviours will increase in late afternoon or early evening. Some of these may include:

- Becoming demanding or aggressive. For more information: **"Anger/Agitation Fact Sheet"** [www.alzheimer.ca/ottawa](http://www.alzheimer.ca/ottawa)
- Paranoia and delusions and paranoia. For more information: **"Paranoia/Delusions Fact Sheet"** [www.alzheimer.ca/ottawa](http://www.alzheimer.ca/ottawa)
- Attempting to leave home.
- Difficulty understanding others.
- An even shorter attention span and inability to concentrate. Difficulty doing tasks that were done without difficulty earlier in the day.
- More impulsive behaviour, where they respond to their own ideas of reality that may place them at risk.

#### Possible causes

A variety of events or issues can trigger late day restlessness that seem to result from changes in the brain. Some of these may include:

- Being tired at the end of day, both physically and mentally. This can lead to an inability to cope with stress.
- Low lighting and more shadows. This can create confusion and hallucinations, especially with

common objects that look different when it is darker.

- Disruption of the circadian cycle, the sleep/wake pattern, because of the dementia. The person cannot distinguish day from night.
- Not as much/no activity in the afternoon compared to the morning can lead to restlessness later in the day.
- Physical issues that may be unresolved such as an infection, hunger, pain, side effects of medications, constipation, dehydration.

#### Using the ABC problem solving approach

##### Antecedent:

- First, try to identify the trigger or what is causing the behaviour.
- Environment: such as low lighting, lack of sensory stimulation.
- Physical: such as an infection, pain, not enough exercise in the afternoon.
- Psychological: such as behavioural issues, stress level, misunderstanding events, feelings of insecurity.

##### Behaviour:

- Observe and listen. Try to name the behaviour for example, "I am restless because..."

##### Consequence:

- How you handle the issue will determine whether the outcome will be a positive one.
- Try to remove the trigger and/or change your response to the behaviour.

#### What to try

Finding a way to respond to late day restlessness may take some trial and error. Every person is different and

may react differently. Some ways to try to head off an episode or to lessen it once it has started are to:

- Approach the person in a calm manner
- Ask the person if they are having discomfort such as hunger, need to use the toilet, pain
- Offer reassurance that everything is all right
- Avoid arguing
- If restless, offer to take them for a walk
- Use distraction techniques
- Gently remind them of the time
- Make sure there is adequate lighting and perhaps try some soft music

#### How to prevent:

- **Keep the home well lit in the evening.** Adequate lighting will reduce shadows and may reduce the agitation that occurs when surroundings are dark or unfamiliar.
- **Try to identify triggers by using the Problem Solving Approach.** It may be helpful to keep a daily journal to pinpoint the causes of late day restlessness symptoms and see which strategies help.
- **Maintain a schedule.** As much as possible, encourage the person with dementia to adhere to a regular routine of meals, waking up and going to bed. This will allow for more restful sleep at night.
- **Avoid stimulants and big dinners.** Avoid nicotine and alcohol, and restrict sweets and caffeine consumption to the morning hours. Have a large meal at lunch and keep the evening meal simple.
- **Plan more active days.** A person who rests most of the day is likely to be awake at night. Plan more challenging activities such as doctor appointments, trips and bathing in the morning or early afternoon. Encourage regular daily exercise, but no later than four hours before bedtime.
- **Limit environmental distractions** particularly during the evening hours such as TV, children arriving, chores, loud music.

- **Pre-bedtime routines.** Early evening activities that are familiar from an earlier time in the person's life may be helpful. Closing the curtains, relaxing in a chair before bedtime, turning on the night light can help.
- **Make a comfortable and safe sleep environment.** The person's sleeping area should be at a comfortable temperature. Provide a nightlight and a comfortable chair.
- **Arrange for a medical examination.** Late day restlessness could be due to physical illness or side effects of medications. Physical ailments, such as urinary tract infections, incontinence problems, restless leg syndrome or sleep apnea (an abnormal breathing pattern in which people briefly stop breathing many times a night) can cause or worsen restlessness. The doctor may recommend certain medications to ease the symptoms, such as antipsychotics, sedatives, or sleep-regulating hormones such as melatonin. These can help some people but because many have serious side effects such as dizziness, sedation (causing sleepiness), or dependence, it is recommended that other options be tried before relying on drugs. Talk this over with the doctor.
- **Be mindful of your own mental and physical exhaustion.** If you are feeling stressed by late afternoon, the person may pick up on it and become agitated or confused. Try to get plenty of rest at night so you have more energy during the day. For more information refer to: *"Taking a Break: Why It's Essential Fact Sheet"* [www.alzheimer.ca/ottawa](http://www.alzheimer.ca/ottawa)

#### Things to keep in mind

Late day restlessness behaviours can be exhausting for caregivers. The best thing you can do is simply take a deep breath, stay calm, and offer understanding until the episode passes. It is essential that you seek support for yourself from an understanding family

member, a friend, a professional or a support group. It sometimes helps to share your experiences with other caregivers who are experiencing the same issues. Remember that you are not alone. Contact your local Alzheimer Society.

This Fact Sheet is provided courtesy of the Alzheimer Society of Ottawa and Renfrew County

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**Resources:**

- Sleep Issues and Sundowning:  
[www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)

**Further information on this topic**

Visit the following websites:

- [www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca)
- [www.alzheimers.org.au](http://www.alzheimers.org.au)

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