

Sundowning

Studies indicate that as many as 20 percent of people with Alzheimer's may experience increased confusion, anxiety, agitation, pacing and disorientation beginning at dusk and continuing throughout the night. These late-day increases in behavioral problems are often called sundowning. Sundowning can disrupt the body's sleep-wake cycle, causing more behavioral problems.

Factors that may cause sundowning

- Mental and physical exhaustion from a full day trying to keep up with an unfamiliar or confusing environment.
- Caregivers, who are exhausted by the events of the day, may give off nonverbal cues of frustration, which could lead to negative reactions in the person with Alzheimer's.
- Reduced lighting and increased shadows may cause persons with Alzheimer's to misinterpret what they see — subsequently, becoming more agitated.

Tips to manage sundowning

- Be mindful of your own mental and physical exhaustion. If you are feeling stressed by the 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.
- Plan more challenging activities (doctor appointments, trips, bathing, etc.) in the morning or early afternoon hours when the person is more alert.
- Make notes about what happens before sundowning events and try to identify triggers.
- Limit the amount of environmental distractions during the evening hours (TV, children arriving, doing chores, loud music, etc.). These distractions may add to the person's confusion.
- Have a large meal at lunch and keep the evening meal simple.
- Keep the home well lit in the evening. Adequate lighting may reduce the person's confusion.
- Don't physically restrain the person. It makes agitation worse.
- If the person needs to pace back and forth, allow this to continue under your supervision. Take a walk outdoors if the weather permits — this may reduce restlessness.
- Talk to the physician about best times of day for taking medication.
- When behavioral interventions and environmental changes do not work, some people with Alzheimer's may need medication for their agitation during the late afternoon and evening hours. This should be discussed with their doctor.

The Alzheimer's Association is the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer care, support and research.

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