

## Sleep Disturbances

Sometimes a person with dementia will experience disturbances in their sleep/wake cycle. This can translate into a lack of restorative sleep for you, the primary caregiver, which can result in stress-related health problems.

In order to address sleep difficulties, one needs to gain an understanding of the potential causes of sleep disruption. Environmental stimuli, medical conditions, dietary factors, elements in the daily routine, or the dementia itself could be the root of the problem.

### **Environmental stimuli:**

*The temperature of the bedroom* - If the room is too hot or too cold, it could affect how well someone sleeps.

*Too much light in the room* - Too much light in the room could prove too stimulating for sleep. If early waking is an issue, the brightness of the sunrise may be the cause. Room-darkening window coverings may help with this problem.

*Having to use the bathroom* - Many of us must rise at night to use the washroom. If, however, the person with dementia becomes disoriented or lost on their way to or from the bathroom, the resulting upset may make it challenging to return to sleep. Perhaps the provision of soft glow strategically-placed night-lights or glo-tape could help guide the person to and from the bathroom.

*A new environment can be confusing* - If the person has recently moved into a new room, this unfamiliar setting could cause sleep problems. Try arranging the furniture in the new room in the same way it was in their previous room.

### **Potential Medical Causes:**

*Medications* - Sleep disruption may be a side effect of some medications. Diuretics, for example, could be causing the individual to awaken in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. Talk to the doctor about medications that could be disturbing sleep. Perhaps they could be taken at a different time of day to mitigate side effects.

*Depression* - Many different medical conditions can impact sleep patterns, and depression is one. Talk to a doctor if you have concerns that the person may be experiencing depression.



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*Other medical conditions* - Describe the symptoms the person is experiencing and your doctor may look at potential treatment options.

## **Potential dietary causes:**

*Consuming too much caffeine* - Too much caffeine acts as a stimulant. Try limiting the intake of caffeinated beverages. You may try switching to non-caffeinated alternatives.

*Consuming too much alcohol* - Too much alcohol disrupts the sleep cycle. The person may fall asleep immediately, but awaken a short time later feeling disorientated or dehydrated.

*Not eating enough* - Going to bed feeling hungry can make it difficult to fall asleep. Having a light snack before bed can sometimes help. If the person awakens in the middle of the night, offer a small snack or half a glass of milk. That may be enough to help them return to bed and fall asleep.

## **Potential daily routine causes:**

*Too much sleep during the day* - If the person with dementia sleeps too much during the day, they may become restless at night as they do not feel tired. The reasons for falling asleep during the day can be many. Awareness of the day/night cycle could be compromised by the dementia or they may not be getting enough mental or physical stimulation, resulting in boredom and excessive daytime sleeping. In the latter case, try to engage the person in activities during the day. An activity could be anything from watching a TV program at home, being taken out for a walk or a drive, enjoying a quiet visit, helping fold laundry or attending an Adult Day Support Program. Appropriate physical and mental activity during the day can help the person sleep much better at night.

*Going to bed too early* - This can cause the individual to awaken during the night. They just may not need as much sleep as they are getting.

*Being over-tired* - When someone is over-tired, they may feel tense and restless, which can make it difficult for them to fall asleep.

*Agitation* - Going to bed feeling agitated can make falling asleep a challenge. It is important to try and recognize what may be causing the upset, and then you can attempt to allay the feelings.



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## **Dementia:**

When a person has dementia, there is physical damage happening to their brain. This damage causes the individual to feel confused, which may lead to the following behaviours:

*Wandering* - If the person wanders at night, it is again important that you attempt to understand what may be causing this.

*Day/Night Reversal* - The person may get up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. When they return to bed and glance at the clock, 12:00 a.m. may be perceived as 12:00 p.m., prompting the person to get out of bed again and start their day. From their perspective, they have slept in! By politely reminding the person that it is still night time, they may better understand the situation and settle in again.

*Progression* - As the disease progresses, it is not unusual for a person to sleep more than they used to or at different times of the day.

Whatever the cause for the sleep problem is, it is very important is that you, as a caregiver, try and look after yourself. If your loved one continuously gets up in the middle of the night, chances are that you are also losing out on some much-needed rest. If you find that you are not getting enough sleep or are feeling overwhelmed, you need to get some help. Contact the Alzheimer Society of Calgary's Family Support Coordinator -- (403) 290-0110 or toll-free 1-877-569-HELP/4357 -- who will discuss your situation with you and assist you in accessing the appropriate resources to help you in your caregiving role.



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