

## **SUNDOWNING**

Sundowning is a symptom that can occur in people with Alzheimer's disease or related dementias. It is characterized by confusion, anxiety, agitation, restlessness or aggressiveness that occurs late in the day (usually late afternoon or early evening).

Estimates on the prevalence of sundowning have been as high as 66% among individuals with Alzheimer's disease or other dementias. Sundowning can occur at any level of dementia but tends to peak in the middle stages of Alzheimer's disease and lessen as the disease progresses. It can be exhausting for the caregiver and often decreases the person with dementia's quality of life.

Sundowning seems to be related to a malfunction in the body's natural sleep/wake rhythms. It may also be related to an inability to deal with stress.

### **Potential triggers**

- Fatigue (mental or physical)
- Disruption of sleep pattern
- Hunger or thirst
- Low lighting, shadows
- Boredom
- Over-stimulation

## **Preventing sundowning**

**Increase exposure to light:** Sundowning occurs when natural daylight diminishes. Increase lighting at dusk to prolong the effect of daylight. It is also beneficial to spend time in outdoor sunlight at any time of the day.

**Glasses and hearing aids:** The effect of low light on the person with dementia is magnified by poor vision and hearing. Make sure that the person with dementia is not in need of eyeglasses or hearing aids.

**Check basic needs:** Is the person hungry or thirsty? Does he/she need toileting? Is the person uncomfortable? All of these may stimulate the tendency to sundown.

**Plan activities early in the day:** Being active in the morning when the person is most energetic will help regulate their sleeping patterns. Avoid physically or mentally demanding activities late in the day. Try to find the right balance between too much and too little activity.

**Encourage afternoon naps:** For people with dementia who appear tired in the afternoon, encourage them to take a short nap (less than 30 minutes) earlier in the afternoon. This helps reduce the fatigue that is often associated with sundowning.

**Exercise:** Regular exercise can help regulate the body and ease the mind. Avoid strenuous exercise late in the afternoon.

**Monitor diet:** Restrict sweets and caffeine consumption to the morning hours. Serve dinner early and offer only a light snack before bedtime.

### **Alzheimer Society of BC Provincial Office**

300 - 828 West 8th Ave.

T: 604.681.6530

[www.alzheimerbc.org](http://www.alzheimerbc.org)

Vancouver, B.C. V5Z 1E2

Toll-free: 1-800.667.3742

[info@alzheimerbc.org](mailto:info@alzheimerbc.org)

**Quiet afternoon:** Plan quiet and relaxing activities in the afternoon just before sundowning time. This can calm the person and prevent him or her from feeling anxious. Activities can include reading, listening to music, watching a favourite program on television, or helping in the house with a familiar task such as folding laundry or wiping the counter.

**Change sleeping arrangements:** Allow the person to sleep in a different bedroom (if possible), in a favourite chair, or wherever it is most likely to provide the best night's sleep. Try keeping the room partially lit with a nightlight to reduce the agitation that occurs when surroundings are dark or unfamiliar.

**Provide a routine:** A regular routine helps the person with dementia orient themselves in the day and provides a sense of security. It also helps regulate sleep patterns. Getting up, eating, exercising, and going to bed at the same time every day reduces the likelihood of sundowning.

**Provide a safe environment:** Make sure your home is safe and secure. Remove dangerous objects. If the person wanders, restrict access to certain rooms.

## **Interacting with a person who is experiencing sundowning**

### **Reassure**

Comfort the person who is sundowning. Tell him/her, “I am here for you...” or “It is going to be OK...” Use a caring touch or a hug, if appropriate. Remind the person of the time, stay calm, avoid arguing, and ask if the person needs anything. Use a calm and gentle tone of voice.

### **Distract**

Distract the person with a favourite object or activity. Engage him/her in a calming activity such as looking at photographs, taking a walk, or singing softly.

### **Reduce stimulation**

Turn off background television and radio. Cover mirrors to avoid over-stimulation and to reduce the risk of confusion or even hallucinations. Talk softly, ask any visitors to leave, and remove any stimuli that could cause anxiety.

### **Seek medical advice**

If non-medical alternatives do not work, medical intervention may help. A physician can assess the person for underlying physical problems that may be triggering the sundowning. Medication may be prescribed to help the person relax at night or to alleviate other symptoms.

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