

Late-Day Confusion (“Sundowning”)



What causes sundowning?

Late-day confusion (commonly known as “Sundowning”) is a term used to describe the occurrence of confusion, anxiety, agitation, or restlessness later in the day (usually late afternoon or early evening). This symptom of Alzheimer’s disease or related dementias can occur at any stage of the disease, but most often peaks in the middle stages of dementia then lessens as the disease progresses. It is estimated that 66% of people living with dementia experience sundowning.

Sundowning often affects the person’s quality of life and it can be exhausting for the caregiver. The person living with dementia may become suspicious, upset or disorientated, see or hear things that are not there and believe things that are not true. There may also be a consistent increase in:

- Pacing or wandering
- Attempting to leave the home
- Aggression (e.g. name-calling, shouting, hitting)
- Difficulty doing tasks that were done earlier in the day without difficulty



Possible causes:

- **Physiological changes in the brain:** Changes in the brain caused by dementia can disrupt the body’s circadian rhythm (internal “body clock”), resulting in confusion between day and night.
- **Fatigue:** Feeling tired—both mentally and physically—can decrease the person’s ability to cope with stress and stimuli, triggering late-day confusion.
- **Low lighting and increased shadows:** Low or inconsistent lighting can increase shadows, causing confusion and an increase in visual mistakes (when the brain mistakes an object for something it is not due to the brain’s changing ability to interpret the visual stimuli taken in).
- **Lack of stimulation or boredom:** Limited or no activity throughout the day can increase restlessness in the late afternoon or early evening.
- **Over-stimulation:** Too much activity or noise at a time of day when the person is fatigued can increase confusion, restlessness, and agitation.
- **Diet:** Consuming sugar, caffeine, or large meals later in the day can disrupt sleep and increase the occurrence or intensity of sundowning.
- **Medications:** Side effects of some medications may increase confusion, restlessness, or sleep disturbances.

Strategies to reduce late-day confusion

The strategies you use to reduce sundowning will vary depending on the type of behaviour, the possible cause, and the conditions within your control. For example, you may not be able to control the person's decreased ability to cope with stress but you may be able to control when, where and how you plan activities. Remember that each person is an individual and may react differently to different strategies. Finding a response that works may take some trial and error. Some strategies to help prevent sundowning from occurring, or to reduce the frequency or severity once it starts include:

Provide adequate lighting during the day

Adequate lighting can help the person to properly identify people and objects, reducing confusion. Keep blinds and curtains open during the day, and turn on extra lighting as needed. If you notice confusion and agitation start to increase as the sun begins to go down, close the blinds and curtains to reduce shadows and turn on additional lights and lamps to prolong the effect of daylight. Keep in mind that while having the television on may be calming for some people, it can also increase the occurrence of shadows.

Be strategic with daytime activity

Encourage physical activity during the time of day when the person is most rested (often during the morning) and calming activities for the time of day when you notice an increase in confusion or agitation. For example, going for a walk in the morning then listening to soothing music or looking through a photo album in the evening.

If possible, plan quiet and relaxing activities just before the person typically begins to show signs of sundowning. For example, watching a favourite program on television or helping in the house with a familiar task, such as folding laundry or wiping the counter.

Remain flexible

It can take some time to find the right balance between too much and too little activity. Keep in mind that some days are better than others and the person's needs will evolve over time as the disease progresses. Try your best to remain flexible to the person's changing needs.

Avoid over-stimulation

Attempt to minimize noise and the number of people around during the time of day when you notice the person is most confused or agitated. For example, if you notice an increase in agitation around 4 p.m., consider scheduling visitors or care services in the morning.

Maintain a consistent routine

A regular routine helps the person living with dementia to orient themselves in the day and provides a sense of security. Try to maintain a consistent routine, where sleep-wake times, meal times and exercise occur at the same time each day.

Limit or discourage naps

If you notice napping interfering with the person's ability to fall asleep or stay asleep during the night, experiment with limiting naps to 30 minutes, or discourage altogether. Keep in mind that some people may benefit from a short nap in the early afternoon in order to reduce fatigue and agitation later in the evening.

Create an evening ritual

Try combining several calming activities to create a soothing evening ritual for the person. A sequence of expected activities can help to cue the person's body to wind down in preparation for sleep.

Example of an evening ritual:

- ⇒ Cup of decaf tea
- ⇒ Soothing music
- ⇒ Gentle hand massage

Examples of how to respond

Example:

During a short visit, Lucy struggles to maintain a conversation with her daughter. She becomes upset, paces in her room and says, “I want to get out of here NOW”. Her daughter notices that her mom experienced similar distress yesterday and the day before around 4:30 p.m., when she typically arrives for a visit after work.



Do:

- As late afternoon approaches, turn on bedroom lights and lamps.
- Close the curtains and blinds to reduce shadows.
- Plan a morning exercise program to reduce restlessness in the afternoon.
- Encourage Lucy to do a calming activity mid-afternoon before late-day confusion occurs. For example, Lucy’s daughter could call her to remind her of her favourite program on television and encourage her to get comfortable with her favourite blanket while she watches it.
- Suggest activities that provide a sense of purpose, like setting the dining room table for the evening meal.
- Move the visit to the morning or early afternoon, if possible.

Consider other causes

Sometimes, the person’s behaviour may appear to be caused by sundowning but is actually an attempt to meet or communicate a need.

Consider if the behaviour could be caused by something other than time of day, such as hunger or the need for a hearing aid. This is where keeping a log can help to identify possible solutions.



Don’t:

- Argue with Lucy about why she must stay home.
- Immediately request that Lucy is prescribed a medication to calm her. This can cause her to sleep much of the day, making it harder to stay asleep at night. However, if other non-pharmacological approaches don’t work, speak with your doctor about whether medication may be appropriate.



Coping with late-day confusion



Offer comfort and reassurance

Recreating past evening rituals, such as watching a favourite television show or a bath, can be comforting and may help to reduce confusion and agitation. Use phrases such as, “I am here for you...” or “It is going to be okay...” in a calm and gentle tone of voice. Offering a comfort item, such as a favourite pillow or blanket, can also help to calm the person.

If the person gets up at night, gently remind them of the time and ask if they need anything. Do your best to stay calm and avoid arguing. If the person prefers to sleep in a different bedroom or a favourite chair and sleeps better this way, allow them to do so, if possible. If they appear confused or agitated because of the darkness of the room, consider using a nightlight to increase comfort.

Keep a log to track patterns

Recording the time of day when the behaviour occurs and the conditions just before or during the behaviour can help you to identify possible triggers, such as too many people in the room or an increase in agitation when the curtains are open in the evening. Make note of which strategies work best.

Seek medical advice

If non-pharmacological approaches 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.

Access support

Supporting a person through late-day confusion (“sundowning”) takes time, energy, patience and creativity. You may feel physically and mentally exhausted during this process. Try to be forgiving of yourself on the days when you feel frustrated and lose your patience. There will be mistakes. Caregiving is a learned skill that takes practice.

Be open to revisiting techniques that did not work in the past—they may work on another day under different circumstances. If you are unsure of what to try next or how to respond in a situation, call the First Link® Dementia Helpline to talk through possible solutions with a trained staff member or volunteer.

Support groups

The Alzheimer Society of B.C. can help connect you with a support group in your local area. A provincial tele-support group is also available.

Contact the First Link® Dementia Helpline for more information about registering for a support group.

First Link® Dementia Helpline

English: 1-800-936-6033 (9 a.m. to 8 p.m.)

Mandarin or Cantonese: 1-833-674-5007 (9 a.m. to 4 p.m.)

Punjabi: 1-833-674-5003 (9 a.m. to 4 p.m.)

Available Monday to Friday