



People with dementia sometimes experience sleep disturbances. Changes in sleep pattern can:

- Affect memory, problem solving, and overall function.
- Increase the risk of falls and fractures.
- Contribute to depression, irritability, and aggression.

People with dementia can also become confused, restless, or agitated late in the afternoon or early evening. This late day behaviour change is sometimes called sundowning. Late day restlessness can cause behaviour changes such as:

- Increased aggression
- More impulsive behaviour
- Trouble understanding others
- Changes in language abilities

If you have noticed any of these symptoms, you may be wondering:

## WHAT CAUSES SLEEP DISTURBANCES AND LATE DAY RESTLESSNESS?

The causes of sleep disturbances and late day restlessness can be very similar. Trouble sleeping can contribute to exhaustion which makes restlessness worse. Symptoms may be due to:

- **Physical or medical causes.** Sleep changes can occur because of mental and physical exhaustion, illness, or hunger. Pain, depression, sleep apnea, and side effects of medicine can change the sleep cycle.
- **Environmental causes.** Room temperature and poor lighting can lead to restlessness. Boredom and anxiety can lead to restlessness too.
- **Other causes.** Going to bed too early, sleeping too much during the day, and lack of exercise can all affect sleep. Caffeine or alcohol can affect sleep too.

## HOW CAN I HELP IN THE MOMENT?

**If the person is awake during the night:**

- Find out if there is something they need.
- Gently remind them of the time.
- Don't use physical restraint. Supervise the person if they want to pace.
- Try offering alternatives like sleeping in a recliner chair.

**If the person is experiencing late day restlessness:**

- Ask if they are having discomfort such as hunger or pain.
- If restless, offer to take them for a walk.
- Use distraction techniques like asking for their help with a task.
- Make sure there is adequate lighting and try playing soft music.

Learn more about restlessness, types of dementia, and strategies [Here](#).



## HOW CAN I HELP PREVENT FUTURE SYMPTOMS?

Every person living with dementia is different. Prevention strategies often require trial and error. For some people, the following strategies can help reduce late day restlessness and sleep problems:

- **Arrange for a medical check-up.** Ask the doctor about physical symptoms and the side effects of medicines.
- **Assess the environment.**
  - Limit stimulating activities in the evening hours.
  - Keep the home well-lit in the evening to reduce scary shadows.
  - Maintain a bedtime routine, including calming music.
- **Monitor food and drink habits.**
  - Cut down on caffeine and sweets during the day.
  - If you think the person is hungry at night, try a light snack just before bed.
  - Have a large meal at lunch and keep the evening meal simple.
  - Keep a commode beside the bed if trips to the bathroom are frequent and disorienting for the person.
- **Create daily routines.**
  - Plan more active days.
  - Limit potentially challenging or upsetting activities to the early day hours.
- **Use the A-B-C approach** to tailor strategies to your unique situation. This approach is outlined in the *Understanding Behaviour Changes* fact sheet available [Here](#).

## MORE INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

- Sign up for Dementia Society workshops: <https://dementiahelp.ca/programs-services/ottawa-programs/>
  - For more information about behavioural and psychological symptoms, sign up for Dementia Basics.
  - For more information on support strategies and approaches, sign up for Supporting Dementia.
- Learn about behaviour changes from Teepa Snow: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpXeefZ2jAM&t=57s>
- Connect with others facing similar situations. Register for a caregiver support group: <https://dementiahelp.ca/programs-services/ottawa-programs/>
- Talk to a dementia care coach about your unique caregiving situation: <https://dementiahelp.ca/programs-services/dementia-care-coach/>