



DementiaUK
Helping families face dementia

Sundowning



What is sundowning?

Sundowning is a term used for changes in behaviour that occur in the evening, around dusk. It is common in people with dementia, who often experience a strong sense of confusion, agitation or anxiety at this time. It is sometimes known as 'late day confusion'.

A person who is experiencing sundowning might have an overwhelming sense that they are in the wrong place. They might say they need to go home, even if they are already at home; or believe that they still live in a former home – often the one where they grew up.

The person might have an intense feeling that they need to pick their children up from school, even if they are now adults; or that they need to go to work, even if they are retired.

Other signs of sundowning include:

- shouting or arguing
- pacing
- shadowing a family member or carer, for example following them around

- confusion about who people are or what is happening around them

Sundowning is thought to affect around 20% of people with dementia, and around 80% of people with dementia in residential settings like care homes, particularly if they have recently moved into the home or changed rooms, or if the environment is busy in the evenings. It is most common in the middle to late stages of dementia.

What causes sundowning?

There are many possible reasons why sundowning may occur. These include:

- tiredness
- the person having unmet needs that they cannot express, eg hunger or thirst
- being in physical pain
- a lack of activity or exposure to natural light during the day
- overstimulation during the day, such as being in a noisy, busy environment that causes stress



- hormonal changes towards the end of the day
- medication side effects
- changes in the person's circadian rhythm (body clock) that occur in some types of dementia, such as Lewy body dementia
- environmental changes like streetlights coming on and the people around them settling in for the evening, which can trigger a sense of being in the wrong place

Supporting a person who is experiencing sundowning

If the person with dementia is experiencing sundowning and becoming confused and distressed, these tips might help.

- Try to distract the person – for example, you could take them into a different room to do an activity, make them a drink, give them a snack, play some familiar music, watch TV or a film, or go out for a walk



- Ask the person what is wrong. Listen carefully to their response and if possible, see if you can deal with the source of their distress. If they struggle to communicate, you can also look for clues in their behaviour – for example, holding or rubbing a part of their body could suggest they are in pain
- Talk in a slow, soothing way
- Gently remind the person what day and time it is – a dementia clock that shows the day, date, time and time of day (eg morning, afternoon, evening) may be helpful
- Hold the person’s hand or sit close to them and stroke their arm
- If the person wants to move around or pace, give them space to do so if it is safe
- Avoid contradicting or arguing with them as this may increase their distress



Practical tips for preventing sundowning

- Follow a routine during the day that contains activities the person enjoys. Going for a walk or visiting shops is good exercise. If this is not possible, try placing their chair by a window as natural light may help reset their body clock
- Try to limit the person's naps during the day to encourage them to sleep well at night – if possible, avoid napping after 3pm
- Avoid large meals in the evening as this can disrupt sleep patterns
- Limit the person's intake of caffeinated drinks. You could offer caffeine-free tea or coffee or fruit tea
- Encourage the person not to drink alcohol later in the day or to stop drinking it completely. Alcohol-free beer, wine, spirits and mocktails are widely available
- Close the curtains and turn the lights on before dusk to ease the transition into night-time

- If possible, cover or remove mirrors and hang curtains in front of glass doors. Reflections can be confusing for some people with dementia and lead to misinterpretation, for example thinking there is another person in their home
- Once you are at home for the evening, speak in short sentences and give simple instructions to the person to try to limit their confusion
- Introduce an evening routine with activities the person enjoys, such as watching a favourite programme, listening to music or an audiobook, or stroking a pet. If they are watching television or listening to the radio, choose something calming and relatively quiet as sudden loud noises or people shouting could cause distress
- If there are children in the house, explain the need for keeping evenings quiet and calm – for example, they could wear headphones for listening to music or playing computer games to minimise noise



- Try to work out whether there is a pattern to the person's sundowning. It may be helpful to keep a brief record of what happens beforehand to establish possible triggers
- If sundowning continues to be a problem, speak to the person's GP or dementia specialist as there may be an underlying cause such as pain, a sleep disorder, medication side effects or an infection. In some cases, medications to treat specific symptoms such as agitation and restlessness may be helpful

Sources of support

To speak to a specialist dementia nurse about sundowning or any other aspect of dementia, please call our Helpline on **0800 888 6678** (Monday to Friday 9am-9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am-5pm) or email helpline@dementiauk.org

To book a phone or video call appointment with an Admiral Nurse, please visit dementiauk.org/book-an-appointment

Dementia UK resources

**Anxiety, depression
and dementia**

dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety-and-depression

**Changes in perception
and hallucinations**

dementiauk.org/changes-in-perception

Coping with distress

dementiauk.org/coping-with-distress

Coping with restlessness

dementiauk.org/dealing-with-restlessness

Dementia and sleep

dementiauk.org/good-habits-for-bedtime

Music and dementia

dementiauk.org/music

Pain and dementia

dementiauk.org/pain



The information in this leaflet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses. We hope you find it useful. If you have feedback, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

Publication date: July 2023

Review date: July 2025

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Thank you.



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