

BVI Alzheimer's Awareness Campaign

I've heard that sundowning may happen with dementia. What is sundowning and how is it treated?

Answers from Glenn Smith, Ph.D. Mayo Clinic

The term "sundowning" refers to a state of confusion at the end of the day and into the night. Sundowning can cause a variety of behaviors, such as confusion, anxiety, aggression or ignoring directions. Sundowning can also lead to pacing or wandering.

Sundowning isn't a disease, but a group of symptoms that occur at a specific time of the day that may affect people with dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease. The exact cause of this behavior is unknown.

Factors that may aggravate late-day confusion include:

- Fatigue
- Low lighting
- Increased shadows
- Disruption of the body's "internal clock"
- Difficulty separating reality from dreams

Tips for reducing sundowning:

- Try to maintain a predictable routine for bedtime, waking, meals and activities.
- Plan for activities and exposure to light during the day to encourage nighttime sleepiness.
- Limit daytime napping.
- Limit caffeine and sugar to morning hours.
- Keep a night light on to reduce agitation that occurs when surroundings are dark or unfamiliar.
- In the evening, try to reduce background noise and stimulating activities, including TV viewing, which can sometimes be upsetting.
- In a strange or unfamiliar setting, bring familiar items — such as photographs — to create a more relaxed, familiar setting.
- Play familiar gentle music in the evening or relaxing sounds of nature, such as the sound of waves.
- Talk with your loved one's doctor if you suspect an underlying condition, such as a urinary tract infection or sleep apnea, might be worsening sundowning behaviour.