



Understanding sleep changes

Many people living with dementia experience changes in behaviour. Understanding the causes of these changes can help you respond.

What are sleep changes?

Sleep changes are very common in older people. It takes longer to fall asleep, you wake up more often or very early in the morning.

For a person living with dementia this is worsened because the body clock in the brain is actually affected by dementia. They may not be able to tell the difference between night and day.

What are the signs of sleep changes?

Someone living with dementia affected by sleep changes may experience:

- Difficulty falling asleep
- Increased waking through the night
- Confusion over daytime and night-time
- Nocturnal leg cramps
- Sleep behaviour disorders, e.g. sleep walking/ talking – common in Huntington's disease
- Urinary issues (toileting more than twice a night)
- Being unable to find the toilet at night
- Unable to express preference for comforting personal bedtime rituals
- Napping a lot during the day and then sleeping very little during the night

'There are many reasons why a person's sleep might change, including their environment (like feeling too hot or cold), new medications or other causes.'

Why do people living with dementia experience sleep changes?

The brain secretes melatonin as the body's natural way of putting you to sleep.

There are a number of factors that can disrupt this and contribute to poor sleep including:

- Pain
- Harsh, bright lights or a blue screen
- Depression, anxiety and illness
- Medications
- Stimulants like having a cup of coffee late in the day
- Change in rituals such as being in a noisy hospital environment with unfamiliar staff.

If someone is sleeping poorly, if they're sleep deprived, they are more likely to develop heart disease and also conditions like depression. A good sleep routine is really important for healthy sleep.

What can I do to help?

- Speak to a GP to make sure it isn't triggered by physical or medical causes.
- Check the bedroom: is it too hot or cold? Is it quiet and dark enough?
- Keep the environment consistent: did they sleep with a hot water bottle in winter?
- Cut down caffeine and alcohol. If they like a cup of tea or coffee in the afternoon, switch to decaf.
- Keep active: schedule activities during the day and avoid sleeping in the afternoon.
- Aim for at least 30-60 minutes of daylight exposure every day to help reset the 'body clock' and regulate sleep patterns.
- Create a relaxation routine before bed - a warm drink before going to bed, perhaps a warm bath, a comfortable bed, not too hot, not too cold, and having dim light and no noise.

This information has been compiled with the assistance of Professor Sue Kurrle, Geriatrician.

Disclaimer: This information is a guide only and is not a replacement for medical care by a qualified professional.



Is the change sudden and severe?

Is it a life threatening or emergency situation?

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