



DementiaUK
Helping families face dementia

Good sleep habits for people with dementia



Dementia and sleep

Every person with dementia will have a different experience of the condition, but disturbed sleep and difficulties around bedtime are very common. This often means that if you care for someone with dementia, neither of you get enough sleep.

There are lots of different reasons why a person with dementia may have sleep issues. These include:

- disturbance to their body clock
- sleeping excessively during the day
- a reduction in the sleep hormone, melatonin, which is produced by the brain
- confusion at bedtime (often called sundowning) or if they wake in the night
- pain
- medication side effects

However, by establishing good habits during the day, at bedtime and during the night, you can help the person with dementia and yourself to sleep better.

Spending time outside

The activities the person with dementia does during the day will affect how tired or restless they are at night. They may be less tired at bedtime if they are physically inactive during the day – for example, if they spend most of their time sitting in one room.

Not getting enough fresh air or daylight can also affect sleep. Spending time in natural daylight is known to improve sleep, but many people with dementia spend a lot of time indoors, which can have a knock-on effect at night.

If possible, support the person with dementia to spend some time outside each day. You could try:

- a walk around the block
- a trip to a park or garden centre
- sitting in the garden

If the person has mobility problems that make it hard for them to get outside, simply sitting by a window in natural light, or in an open doorway, may help to improve their sleep.

It's not always easy to support a person with dementia in getting outside. You might, for example, be at work during daylight hours, or have mobility problems yourself. Consider asking friends, family and neighbours to help with taking the person outside for a short walk or sitting with them in the garden – they will often be glad to support you.

Daytime naps

Many people with dementia become sleepy during the day, and while a nap may help them recharge, too much daytime sleep can affect their ability to settle and stay asleep at night.

As dementia progresses and daily activities become more taxing, it may be beneficial for the person to have a short nap earlier in the day – for example, late morning or after lunch. This may help to ease confusion as the day goes on, without affecting night-time sleep.

Try to keep naps to 30-60 minutes long – longer sleeps could make the person more confused. It may be tempting to allow them to sleep for longer, especially if it gives you a

break, but shorter naps may allow you both to have a better sleep at night.

Food and drink

The things we eat and drink can have an impact on our sleep, so think about the food and drink the person with dementia consumes throughout the day – you may be able to identify a link between their diet and how well they sleep.

These tips may help:

- Try providing a main meal at lunchtime, and a lighter meal in the evening
- Try to prevent the person with dementia eating too much sugary food, especially later in the day
- Aim to reduce the amount of caffeine the person consumes – you could switch to decaffeinated tea and coffee
- Offer a herbal tea, such as camomile, or a warm milky drink before bedtime, as these can be calming. If the person tends to need the toilet frequently at night, it may help if they drink

less in the hours before bed – but make sure they still drink enough fluids throughout the day

- We often mistakenly think that alcohol helps us sleep, but it can have the opposite effect. If the person enjoys a glass of wine or beer in the evening, look for low- or zero-alcohol varieties. If they do continue to drink alcohol and they take medication, ask a healthcare professional such as their GP or a pharmacist if this is safe: some medications interact with alcohol

Bedtime routines

Dementia can cause confusion and anxiety, and in some people, this is worse in the evening. For example, they may believe that they need to go home, even if they are already at home, or that they have to collect their children from school, but they are now adults. They may pace, shout, argue or try to leave the house. This is known as sundowning – see Sources of support on p7 for details of our leaflet on sundowning.

Providing reassurance for the

person with dementia can be the most powerful way to help them feel calmer and ready to go to bed. This may involve simply sitting with them and letting them know that you are there.

Having an evening routine where the person with dementia knows what to expect can be reassuring and calming. You could try:

- encouraging and supporting the person to have a warm bath or shower, or if they prefer, to sit with a warm hot water bottle in a cover, or a cosy blanket
- drawing the curtains and turning on lights before dusk, so the person is less aware of the change from daylight to darkness
- spending some relaxing time together before bed, eg listening to familiar music or reading a chapter of a book to them
- switching off the TV an hour before bed. If the person with dementia uses a mobile phone, tablet or computer, encourage them to put these away, rather than keeping them in the bedroom, or at least set them to



night-time mode – this will help to prevent overstimulation and exposure to ‘blue light’, which can affect natural sleep patterns

Setting the scene for bed

Although the tips above may help to improve sleep for a person with dementia, it’s important to consider their own preferences. Often, the best way to find out what they like and dislike is to talk to them and

ask, although this will depend on their ability to communicate.

It can also be helpful to think back to the person’s preferences for bedtime before they were diagnosed with dementia. If they liked to go to bed late at night, for example, they may still prefer that now, and so it will be difficult to get them ready for bed earlier in the evening.

If the person is unable to tell you

what they would like to happen at bedtime, or if the routines you had in place previously are no longer helping, you might need to try different things and see what works best.

- Check the temperature of the person's bedroom to make sure it's not too hot or cold – 18-21°C suits most people
- Make sure the person's nightwear is suitable for the season. Being too hot or cold, or in discomfort from tight collars or waistbands, may make them struggle to settle and wake up during the night
- If they wear incontinence products, check that these are comfortable and will last the night
- Ensure their bedding is suitable for the weather and comfortable to sleep in. Softer fabric textures and a heavier top cover may offer more comfort. You could also use a hot water bottle or electric blanket to warm their bed before they get in, but don't use them overnight as they may cause overheating
- Consider trying a weighted blanket – these use 'pressure therapy', which can feel like a warm, comforting hug, and promote feelings of calm. Be aware, though, that some people find these restrictive, especially if they are frail – the blanket should weigh no more than 10% of the person's body weight
- Make sure the person can lie in a comfortable position. You could provide extra pillows to help with this, or there are many types of support cushion available to buy, such as V-shaped pillows and wedge cushions
- Put an easy-to-read clock next to their bed if they are able to tell the time, so if they wake, they are more likely to understand whether it's time to get up
- Experiment to see whether the person sleeps better in darkness or with a night light
- Use blackout curtains or blinds to maintain a good day-to-night light pattern, especially in the lighter summer months, and draw them at the same time each evening

- If the person tends to get up in the night to use the toilet or walk around, leave a light on in their room and/or hallway. Keeping the bathroom light on and the door open can help them find their way to the toilet – make sure the route to the bathroom is kept clear to prevent falls
- Sometimes, medication can aid sleep, but this must only be used under the guidance of your GP or pharmacist.

Sources of support

If you have any questions about helping a person with dementia with sleep, or any other aspect of dementia, call our free Helpline on **0800 888 6678** (Monday-Friday 9am-9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am-5pm, every day except 25th December) or email helpline@dementiauk.org

If you would prefer a pre-booked appointment by phone or video call, please visit dementiauk.org/get-support/closer-to-home

You may also find the following leaflets helpful:

Sundowning

dementiauk.org/sundowning

Making the home safe and comfortable for a person with dementia

dementiauk.org/safe-comfortable-home-for-a-person-with-dementia

Eating and drinking

dementiauk.org/eating-and-drinking

Dealing with restlessness

dementiauk.org/dealing-with-restlessness

The information in this booklet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses.

We are always looking to improve our resources, to provide the most relevant support for families living with dementia. If you have feedback about any of our leaflets, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

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For more information on how to support Dementia UK, please visit dementiauk.org/donate or call **0300 365 5500**.
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If you're caring for someone with dementia or if you have any other concerns or questions, call or email our Admiral Nurses for specialist support and advice.

Call **0800 888 6678** or email helpline@dementiauk.org

Open Monday-Friday, 9am-9pm
Saturday and Sunday, 9am-5pm



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