

# Dementia and sleep



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Disturbed sleep and difficulties around bedtime are very common in people with dementia. They may struggle to get to sleep at bedtime, wake during the night, or wake very early in the morning. This often means that if you care for someone with dementia, neither of you manage to get enough sleep.

There are many different reasons why sleep difficulties might happen, including:

- disturbance to the person's 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 – please see p7) or if they wake in the night
- unmet needs such as hunger, thirst, being hot or cold
- pain
- urinary problems, including incontinence and needing the toilet frequently – which may be caused by dementia itself or another issue like diabetes, prostate problems in men, or urinary tract infections (UTIs)
- medication side effects
- drinking alcohol or caffeine late in the day

However, by establishing good habits during the day, at bedtime and during the night, you can help the person with dementia and yourself 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, or if they do not get enough fresh air or daylight.

Spending time in natural daylight is known to improve sleep, but many people with dementia spend a lot of time indoors – often mostly in one room – which can have a knock-on effect at night.

If the person is physically fit and well, it is likely to be easier for them to spend time outside – for example, they could go for a walk or bike ride (with you or someone else for support, if necessary), or do practical outdoor tasks like gardening, dog-walking or washing the car.

If the person is less mobile, they will need more support to spend time outside, and gentler activities to do. You could try:

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

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If it is hard for the person with dementia to get outside at all, simply sitting by a window in natural light, or in an open doorway, may help to improve their sleep. Using a wheelchair may also be an option for helping the person to get outdoors for some natural sunlight and stimulation.

It is 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 using a wheelchair if necessary, or sitting with them in the garden – they will often be glad to support you.

### Stimulation during the day

The activities that a person with dementia does during the day can have a positive impact on their sleep. As well as providing mental stimulation, keeping the person busy will help to avoid them napping excessively during the day, which can have a knock-on effect at night.

Activities that the person might be able to take part in include:

- physical exercise – you can tailor this to the person's needs (for example someone who is physically fit may be able to go swimming; someone who is less mobile could do chair exercises)
- volunteering
- playing board or card games, doing puzzles or colouring
- going to community groups such as a choir, book club or pottery class
- attending a support group for people with dementia and their carers
- going to a day centre

- spending time with children or grandchildren
- reading a book, magazine or newspaper, or listening to an audiobook
- household tasks like washing up, tidying, mowing the lawn, organising books on the shelf
- watching TV (but not too close to bedtime) – you could find some films or favourite programmes from the person’s past
- using a therapy doll or toy animal – please see Sources of support on p14 for our leaflet on doll therapy
- spending time with a pet
- looking at photos
- listening to music and dancing (chair dancing for people with mobility problems)
- aromatherapy – this can promote sleep, ease stress and relieve aches and pains. Please see Sources of support on p14 for more information
- pampering, eg having their hair washed, brushed or styled, doing a face mask, painting their nails; or for men, having a shave

### **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.

If the person with dementia does sleep during the day, it may be beneficial to encourage this earlier in the day – for example, late morning or after lunch. Try to keep naps to 30-60 minutes long – longer sleeps could make the person more confused and result in

them being less tired at night. 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

Food and drink can affect our sleep, so think about what the person with dementia eats and drinks 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 avoid 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, or set a cut-off time for caffeinated drinks, eg 3pm
- Offer herbal tea, such as camomile or peppermint, 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 an alcoholic drink, look for low or zero-alcohol varieties. These can taste very similar to those that contain alcohol and are better for all-round health.

If the person does drink alcohol, aim to limit their consumption to one or two drinks. If they take medication, ask their GP or a pharmacist if this is safe: some medications interact with alcohol and may cause side effects.



## Sundowning

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, shadow their carer or try to leave the house. This state of intense confusion is known as sundowning.

Providing reassurance can be the most powerful way to avoid sundowning and help the person with dementia feel calmer and ready for bed. This may involve simply sitting with them and letting them know that you are there. Please see Sources of support on p15 for details of our leaflet on sundowning, which includes lots of tips for managing this common but distressing issue.

## Bedtime routines

A calming and predictable bedtime routine could help the person with dementia settle before bed. Ideally, this should be the same every day, including the timings – many of us like to stay up later and

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sleep in at the weekend, but aiming for consistent times to go to bed and get up can improve sleep overall.

These tips may help:

- Support the person to have a warm bath or shower (although this is best done earlier in the day if they find washing stressful)
- Encourage them to sit with a warm hot water bottle in a cover, or a cosy blanket
- Draw the curtains and turn on lights before dusk, so the person is less aware of the change from daylight to darkness
- Spend some time relaxing before bed, eg listening to familiar, calming music, giving them a gentle hand massage or reading a chapter of a book to them
- Switch off the TV an hour before bed
- Encourage them to put their mobile phone, tablet or computer away an hour before bedtime, if they use them, rather than keeping them in the bedroom. If they prefer to have them in the bedroom, set them to night-time mode – this will help to prevent overstimulation and exposure to ‘blue light’, which can affect natural sleep patterns
- Ensure any children in the home understand that this is a quiet and calm time of day – you could ask them to use headphones if they are listening to music or playing video games, for example

Although the tips above may help to improve sleep for a person with dementia, it is important to consider their own preferences. If they cannot communicate what they would like to happen in the run-up to bedtime, it can be helpful to think back to their preferences before they developed 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 previously are no longer helping, you might need to try different things and see what works best.

### Setting the scene for bedtime

‘Sleep hygiene’ describes measures that can be taken to help a person have a good night’s sleep. These include making sure the environment promotes sleep. These sleep hygiene tips could help the person with dementia fall asleep more easily and sleep through the night.

- Check the temperature of the person’s bedroom to make sure it is 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 it hard to settle and stay asleep

- 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
- Use a hot water bottle or electric blanket to warm their bed before they get in, but do not use them overnight as they may cause overheating. If the person lives alone, these are best avoided for safety reasons
- Consider trying a weighted blanket – these use ‘pressure therapy’, which can promote feelings of calm. Be aware, though, that some people find them 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 use a special support cushion like a V-shaped pillow or wedge cushion
- If the person struggles to turn over in bed, a fitted satin sheet and satin pyjamas can make this easier
- If they can tell the time, put an easy-to-read clock next to their bed so that if they wake, they are more likely to understand whether it is time to get up – you can buy dementia clocks that show the phase of the day (ie morning, afternoon, evening, night) as well as the time
- Experiment to see whether the person sleeps better in darkness or with a nightlight. If they prefer darkness but tend to get up in the night, you could put nightlights in the hall instead or use a motion sensor 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
- Try using ‘white noise’: a calming background noise that can promote sleep. You can buy white noise machines or use a smart device like an Alexa to play white noise
- Leave the bathroom light on, the door open and the toilet lid up so they can find and use the toilet easily overnight

### **Coping with night waking**

Some people with dementia stay awake late into the night, or wake frequently overnight. This can be very difficult for carers, especially if – as is often the case – the person is distressed or becomes confrontational when you encourage them to sleep.

It is impossible to force someone to sleep, so if you have tried the tips in this leaflet and the person is still wakeful at night, you may need to accept that this is the case and find different coping strategies.

These could include:

- Ensuring the home is safe if the person is walking around at night, for example by removing trip hazards like loose rugs, locking potentially dangerous items like sharp knives and cleaning chemicals away, and keeping door keys hidden from sight (but make sure you can access them quickly in an emergency). Please see Sources of support on p14 for information on making the home safe and comfortable for a person with dementia
- Using a bed sensor that will alert you if the person gets out of bed, and a door sensor that will sound if they try to leave the home

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- Settling them down with a quiet activity like watching a film or listening to music with headphones
- Leaving lights on in the rooms they tend to use overnight – dimmer light switches or bulbs can help avoid overstimulation
- Wear earplugs so you are not disturbed by the person being awake – you can buy types that allow some noise to get through so you can still hear if the person needs you
- Arranging some additional care during the day – whether that is informal care from a family member or friend who can visit regularly, paid home care or a day centre – so you can catch up on sleep or at least rest
- Considering using an overnight carer, even if not every night

### Medication

Sometimes, medication can aid sleep, and is worth considering if disturbed sleep is taking its toll on you and the person with dementia. However, medication is not always appropriate – for example, it could increase the risk of falls due to drowsiness. Medications – including natural or herbal remedies – must only be used under the guidance of a GP or pharmacist, so please discuss this with the person's healthcare professional.

### Support for carers

It can be difficult to get a good night's sleep if the person you care for has sleep difficulties. This may be because of the noise they make overnight, them wanting you to be awake with them, or worrying that the person is distressed or at risk of harm.

Sleep deprivation can be extremely difficult to cope with. It can affect your mood and make it hard to carry out your usual daily



activities, such as caring for the person with dementia, working, looking after children or driving.

It may be helpful to ask social services for a free carer's assessment (for you) and needs assessment (for the person with dementia). These will look at what support you both need, which may include options like respite care to allow you to catch up on sleep.

If you are struggling with the emotional effects of sleep deprivation, you might find it helpful to speak to your GP about support they can offer, for example talking therapies like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which can help you develop coping skills for difficult thoughts and situations. Carer support groups can also be very helpful for exchanging tips and reassurance with other people in similar situations.

Our dementia specialist Admiral Nurses can also offer practical and emotional support – please see Sources of support on p14 for contact details.

## Sources of support

To speak to a specialist Admiral Nurse about dementia and 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 25<sup>th</sup> December) or email

➤ [helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

If you prefer, you can pre-book a phone or video call appointment with an Admiral Nurse: visit ➤ [dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)

### Dementia UK resources

#### Aromatherapy

➤ [dementiauk.org/aromatherapy-and-dementia](https://dementiauk.org/aromatherapy-and-dementia)

#### Coping with distress

➤ [dementiauk.org/coping-with-distress](https://dementiauk.org/coping-with-distress)

#### Dealing with restlessness

➤ [dementiauk.org/dealing-with-restlessness](https://dementiauk.org/dealing-with-restlessness)

#### Doll therapy

➤ [dementiauk.org/doll-therapy](https://dementiauk.org/doll-therapy)

#### Eating and drinking

➤ [dementiauk.org/eating-and-drinking](https://dementiauk.org/eating-and-drinking)

#### Living aids and assistive technology

➤ [dementiauk.org/living-aids-and-assistive-technology](https://dementiauk.org/living-aids-and-assistive-technology)

#### Making the home safe and comfortable for a person with dementia

➤ [dementiauk.org/safe-comfortable-home](https://dementiauk.org/safe-comfortable-home)

### **Music and dementia**

➤ [dementiauk.org/music-and-dementia](https://dementiauk.org/music-and-dementia)

### **Pain and dementia**

➤ [dementiauk.org/pain-and-dementia](https://dementiauk.org/pain-and-dementia)

### **Sundowning**

➤ [dementiauk.org/sundowning](https://dementiauk.org/sundowning)

## **Other resources**

### **Bed Advice UK**

➤ [bedadvice.co.uk](https://bedadvice.co.uk)

### **The Sleep Charity**

Includes the National Sleep Helpline: **03303 530 541**

➤ [thesleepcharity.org.uk](https://thesleepcharity.org.uk)

### **The Sleep Council**

➤ [sleepcouncil.org.uk](https://sleepcouncil.org.uk)

### **The Sleep Foundation**

➤ [sleepfoundation.org](https://sleepfoundation.org)

### **Sleep problems: NHS**

➤ [nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-health-issues/sleep](https://nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-health-issues/sleep)

**To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse  
about any aspect of dementia:**

Contact our Helpline:  
**0800 888 6678** or [👉 helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

Book a virtual appointment:  
[👉 dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)

**Our charity relies entirely on donations to fund our  
life-changing work. If you would like to donate to help us  
support more families:**

- Call **0300 365 5500**
- Visit [👉 dementiauk.org/donate](https://dementiauk.org/donate)
- Scan the QR code

**Thank you.**



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Helping families face dementia



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Publication date: August 2024. Review date: August 2026. © Dementia UK 2024

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