

Sleep Problems in Dementia: A Guide for Patients & Families

Sleep disturbances are common in people living with dementia. Individuals may have trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or maintaining a regular sleep-wake cycle. Some people may sleep more during the day and be awake at night. These changes can be distressing for both the person with dementia and their caregivers. Understanding why sleep problems occur and using supportive strategies can help improve rest and nighttime safety.

Common Sleep Problems in Dementia

- Difficulty falling asleep
- Frequent waking during the night
- Waking very early in the morning
- Sleeping more during the day
- Nighttime confusion or agitation
- Wandering during the night

Why Sleep Problems Occur

- Changes in the brain caused by dementia
- Disruption of the body's internal sleep-wake cycle
- Daytime inactivity or excessive napping
- Anxiety, depression, or discomfort
- Medication side effects
- Environmental factors such as noise or lighting

Strategies That May Help

Maintain a Consistent Schedule

- Keep regular times for waking, meals, and bedtime
- Encourage daytime activity to promote nighttime sleep

Encourage Daytime Light Exposure

- Exposure to natural daylight can help regulate the sleep cycle
- Gentle physical activity outdoors may be beneficial

Limit Daytime Napping

- Short naps may be helpful, but long daytime naps can worsen nighttime sleep

Create a Calm Evening Routine

- Encourage relaxing activities in the evening
- Avoid stimulating television or loud environments before bedtime

Optimize the Sleep Environment

- Keep the bedroom comfortable, quiet, and dark
- Use nightlights to reduce confusion in the dark
- Maintain a comfortable room temperature

When to Speak With a Healthcare Provider

- If sleep problems become severe or persistent
- If nighttime wandering creates safety concerns
- If medications may be contributing to sleep disturbance
- If sudden changes in sleep occur

Tips for Caregivers

- Maintain predictable daily routines
- Encourage physical activity during the day
- Provide reassurance if nighttime confusion occurs
- Seek help if sleep disruption becomes overwhelming

National Organizations & Resources

✓ Alzheimer's Association

☎ 800-272-3900 | 🌐 alz.org

✓ National Institute on Aging

🌐 nia.nih.gov

✓ Family Caregiver Alliance

🌐 caregiver.org

✓ Eldercare Locator

☎ 1-800-677-1116 | 🌐 eldercare.acl.gov

Final Notes

- Sleep disturbances are very common in dementia.
- Environmental adjustments and consistent routines often help improve sleep.
- Caregivers should seek support when nighttime care becomes difficult to manage.