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Practice Areas: Virtual, Lenasia and Roodepoort
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DEMENTIA AND SLEEP PATTERNS

People with dementia tend to experience changes to their sleep patterns; the severity may vary depending on the stage of the disease. Sleep problems generally tend to become more pronounced during the later stages of the disease. As the disease progresses, the person with dementia may feel exhausted by everyday tasks and activities such as eating, communicating or trying to make sense of their environment. The 'internal biological clock' which helps to differentiate between night and day may also become damaged resulting in the person becoming either sleepy or wakeful at the wrong time of day. It is not uncommon for the person to completely reverse the normal sleep pattern i.e. sleeping all day and staying up all night.

Sleep difficulties take one of two forms:

Difficulty sleeping at night: Trouble falling asleep at night or frequently waking up during the night. Those who cannot sleep may become restless or they may wander. They may yell or call out during these waking periods.

Daytime napping: Sleeping more than usual during the day. Factors that contribute to daytime sleepiness include the following:

- Damage to brain cells caused by dementia
- Mental health conditions such as depression
- Sedative medications
- Insufficient sleep at night

Although medication can aid sleep, it is also known to be associated with a greater chance of falls. Considering that the risks may outweigh the benefits, non-pharmaceutical means of coping with sleep difficulties is advisable as a first-step when managing sleep-related difficulties.



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Non-pharmaceutical treatment for sleep difficulties:

Treat pain and other medical conditions: Identify and treat physical difficulties such as chronic pain and other medical conditions including urinary tract infections, restless leg syndrome and sleep apnea.

Check for medication side-effects: Medication, such as antidepressants and antipsychotics, prescribed to treat other dementia-related symptoms may interfere with sleep. Check with the medical team if medication with sedative effects can be changed or be given at a different time of the day.

Avoid alcohol, chocolates, nicotine and caffeine: These are stimulants which promote wakefulness. Limit intake of stimulants, especially in the late afternoon and evening.

Encourage physical activity: If physically able, encourage a regular exercise routine such as a daily morning walk. Physical activities can help to promote better sleep at night. Plan physical activity for early in the day as excessive physical or mental exhaustion in the evening may increase agitation.

Establish a sleep routine: Plan for bed time at the same time every day and create a calming bed time routine e.g. reading out aloud, playing soothing music. The routine bedtime activity or routine will, over a period of time, become associated with sleep.

Increase exposure to bright light or sunshine during the day: Exposure to day time light helps to maintain the internal body clock which establishes patterns for day and night. Studies have confirmed that exposure to light during the day tends to increase sleep quality, decrease depression and lower agitation. Open curtains and windows to obtain light during the day or go outside for a walk at the same time every day.

Utilize a Dementia Clock: A dementia day/night clock may assist those with day and night reversal. The design of the dementia day/night clock is simple and clearly shows the time of day as either morning, afternoon, evening or night without confusing the person with additional information such as the exact time. Other dementia clocks include information such as exact time, time of day and date. As the disease progresses, the simple day/night clock may be easier for the person to comprehend.



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Kindly contact "Dear Dementia" for further information regarding support for caregivers:

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