

AUTUMN LEAVES LEARNING SERIES

COPING WITH SUNDOWNING

In caring for someone with Alzheimer's or dementia, you may have noticed your loved one becomes agitated, confused or difficult in the afternoon or evening.

Called "sundowning" or "sundowners syndrome," this affects an estimated 20 percent of people with Alzheimer's, typically those with mid-stage disease. People who "sundown" may become more forgetful, confused, delirious, agitated, anxious or restless. They may pace the floor, wander, yell or become combative.

If you are caring for someone who exhibits "sundowning" behavior, try to stay as patient as you can.

The cause isn't clear. Some researchers suspect that the plaques and tangles that develop in the brains of people with Alzheimer's may also affect the body's internal clock. People with dementia may become fatigued by their inability to process information; by late afternoon, they're exhausted and irritable. Or, it's possible they're not tired enough. A person who has stayed indoors and inactive all day may end up restless by afternoon.

Several factors can increase the risk for sundowning, including constipation, pain, poor nourishment, infection, and a noisy or disruptive sleep environment. A medication – or too many medications – can also contribute.

Many aspects of daily life at Autumn Leaves are geared toward reducing sundowning. We design our buildings with abundant natural light, which may help "reset" residents' biological clocks. We invite residents to exercise and enjoy a variety of activities each day. That keeps them active and thus more likely to wind down in the afternoon and sleep at night.

If you are caring for someone who exhibits "sundowning" behavior, try to stay as patient as you can. Look for signs that the person might be experiencing pain, hunger or thirst, or might need to use the toilet. During the day, discourage naps and encourage exercise, like walking, and limit caffeine and sugar to the morning hours. Schedule activities or outings in the morning, and do only simple, calming activities in the afternoon.

In the evening, try to remove any excessive noise or clutter that might add to the person's agitation. Gently help your loved one remember where he or she is and what time it is. Avoid arguing; instead, offer reassurance. Allowing a dim light in the sleeping area may help your loved one to feel safer and more comfortable. If these steps don't help, talk with your doctor.

Source: The Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org/care); WebMD (www.webmd.com/alzheimers)

