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National University Health System

Managing Sleep Problems In Persons With Dementia



General

Managing Sleep Problems In Persons With Dementia

Sleep problems are common in older adults. As we age, the body's natural sleep cycle becomes less sensitive and older people especially with dementia may have trouble telling day and night apart. Older persons require about 6 to 8 hours of sleep. This may vary and be less when an older person is less active.

Causes of Sleep Problems:

Physical

- Medical conditions.
- Cognitive decline and sleep cycle of older person becoming disordered.
- Lack of activity and stimulation during the day.
- Lack of exercise.
- Hunger

Environment

- Too cold or too hot.
- Insufficient exposure to sunlight during the day.
- Bedroom is not conducive for sleep.
- New environment.

Poor Sleep Hygiene

- No regular sleep routine.
- Spending too much time in bed during the day – bed is not associated with sleep.
- Sleeping too much during the day.
- Overstimulation before bedtime.
- Caffeine consumption before bed.



What Can I Do?

During The Day

- Regular exercise.
- Schedule activities to occupy them.
- Avoid taking too many naps.
- Spend less time in bed during the day.
- Have a regular sleep routine including regular waking and sleeping times.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol.

At Bedtime

- Give them a snack if they are hungry.
- Check that they are not too warm or too cold.
- Give a back rub or leg massage before bed.
- Play soft, soothing music at the bedside.
- Have a sleep routine/ritual – changing into pyjamas, inviting them to lay out their blanket.
- Have a familiar, comfort item in bed e.g. comfort pillow.

What About Sleeping Pills?

- Sleeping pills should only be used if prescribed by a doctor.
- They only work for a short period of time.
- There are side effects of these medications and there is a risk of addiction.
- It is better to improve sleeping and bedtime habits.

Why Do Behaviour Problems Tend To Occur At Sunset?

Some people with moderate to severe dementia become agitated towards the evening. This is known as 'sundowning'.

Strategies To Cope With 'Sundowning'

- Distract your loved one with activities such as playing music, craftwork, taking a walk or watching television.
- Close the curtains so they do not see the darkness outside.
- Turn on the lights to brighten the room.
- Reduce noise and unnecessary activity around the person to calm them down.

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This information has been prepared by the Memory Clinic at Alexandra Hospital (AH). The AH Memory Clinic offers comprehensive assessment, support and management of those with memory problems through a multi-disciplinary team.

Need more information?
Message us via your dedicated WhatsApp group or email asknusathome@nuhs.edu.sg.

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