

GUIDE · 5 MIN READ

Sundowning: what helps when dementia gets harder in the evening

Around 1 in 5 people with dementia experience 'sundowning' — confusion, restlessness or distress in the late afternoon and evening. It almost always responds to small, boring, repeated changes.

What helps

- Turn lights on before dusk — close the blinds, switch on lamps, keep the room evenly lit. The transition from light to dark is the trigger more often than the dark itself.
- Move the demanding parts of the day (shower, big meal, visitors) to before lunch.
- Cut caffeine after midday, including iced tea. Even decaf affects some people.
- Keep an early, light dinner and a quiet wind-down hour. No cable news in the background.
- If they're pacing, walk with them rather than blocking them — five minutes of company resets most episodes.
- Watch for pain, hunger, thirst, needing the bathroom, or a wet brief. Many sundowning episodes are unmet needs without words.
- Rule out a UTI if it starts suddenly — same-day PCP appointment or urgent care. UTIs cause dramatic confusion in older adults.

What tends to make it worse

- Arguing with the false belief ('the kids are coming') — agree, redirect, then change the subject.

- Trying to do anything new or unfamiliar after 4pm.
- Long visits from grandchildren in the late afternoon — lovely in theory, exhausting in practice.
- Long naps after 3pm. Short rests before lunch are fine.

Spot the pattern before it spirals

The Care Companion's two-minute daily log surfaces sundowning patterns by day, week and time-of-day — so the doctor sees what you're seeing. 7-day free trial.

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General guidance for family caregivers. Sudden, severe behavior change needs a same-day medical assessment — call your doctor or go to urgent care. In an emergency, call 911.

Free guide from The Care Companion — practical tools for families caring for someone with dementia. More guides at thecarecompanion.com/guides