

Monthly newsletter for people caring for those affected by Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia.

alzheimer's association®

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Dementia & Daylight Savings Time

By Gabriella Garcia, PsyD

Daylight Savings Time is often referred to as a nuisance, but those of us without cognitive impairment typically adjust with a few tweaks to our schedules. Daylight Savings Time begins at 2:00 A.M. on the second Sunday of March and we revert back to standard time on the first Sunday in November at 2:00 A.M. I know I'm not alone when I say reverting

back in the fall throws me off schedule, but what about our loved ones with dementia that don't adapt as easily?

Now that it's Fall and we "fall back" on the clock, night comes sooner which can really affect their routine, sleep pattern and the onset of Sundowner's Syndrome or sundowning.

Sundowning, if you're not familiar, is when someone living with Alzheimer's and other dementia experience problems sleeping or increased confusion, anxiety, agitation, pacing, disorientation, and even hallucinations beginning at dusk and continuing through the night. We don't know the exact cause of the sundowning phenomenon, but we do know these changes are a result of the disease's impact on the brain.

When the body's internal clock is upset in someone with dementia - such as when Daylight Savings Time begins or ends - it can be very hard to adjust not only for the person with dementia, but also for their care-



givers. According to Sanam Hafeez, PsyD, a New York City-based neuropsychologist, a "lack of sunlight suppresses the production of two important hormones - serotonin and sleep-inducing melatonin - both of which play an important role in mood balance." In other words, a person's level of serotonin and melatonin decreases when there is less sunlight, which may lead to symptoms of depression.

As a former caregiver to someone who experienced sundowning on a daily basis (and all throughout the night) in the mid-stages of the disease process, I know just how important sleep is for all parties involved. So, now that you may be in the thick of dealing with the repercussions of the time change, what can you do to ease difficult behaviors due to it being dark at what seems like 3 o'clock?

Keep a routine. If you've ever taken one of our education programs, you know how much we like to stress that incorporating a

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routine for your loved one with dementia is key. Keeping a familiar schedule may help to ease the transition that occurs when Daylight Savings Time ends and we revert back to standard time. Scheduling activities such as doctor appointments in the earlier hours of the day is also helpful as this is likely the time when your loved one is more alert.

Get some vitamin D. Natural light is the best way to help our bodies adjust our internal clock. A light walk is also a great way to spend time with your loved one, especially if you're preparing them for a visit from family or friends during the holiday season. So put on those walking shoes and go for a stroll!

Keep the house bright. Keeping your home brightly lit also helps to adjust to the time change, and it also minimizes shadows that naturally occur as the sun goes down. Closing curtains and blinds is also important prior to dusk as folks with dementia may see their reflection in the window and become afraid.

Reduce Stimulation. Turn off the television and offer soothing music instead. Too much stimulation in the evening

hours can lead to confusion.

Redirect, redirect, redirect. One of the best ways to help your loved one with dementia move on from something they may have become fixated on is to use redirection while meeting them in their reality. For example, if your loved one is certain that the reflection in the window is someone outside, instead of arguing that no one is there, say, "I am going to go tell them to leave. How about you help me (insert activity that works for you/your loved one)?"

Because sundowning can cause all of the behaviors previously listed, be sure to speak to your loved one in a calm manner so as to not further upset them. Approach slowly from the front and offer reassurance. Allow them to pace safely as needed and remember not to argue. If none of these suggestions are working for your loved one, please consult with your physician as there may be another issue causing agitation. Remember, you can always call our 24/7 Helpline at 800-272-3900 to talk to a live trained professional who will help guide you through these issues.

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