



SLEEP DISTURBANCE IN DEMENTIA

Introduction:

Sleep disturbances are very common among people with dementia. These may include trouble falling asleep, waking up frequently during the night, waking up too early, excessive daytime sleepiness, and nighttime wandering. Dementia affects the brain's ability to control the sleep-wake cycle, also known as the circadian rhythm, leading to these disruptions.

Prevalence

Up to 44% of people with Alzheimer's Disease and 90% of people with Lewy Body Dementia suffer from sleep disturbance.¹ These issues tend to become worse as the disease progresses.

Causes of Sleep Disturbance in Dementia Patients:

1. **Changes in the brain** – Degeneration of the suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN) disrupts the body's internal clock.
2. **Environmental factors** – Too much light or noise at night, or lack of daylight during the day.
3. **Side effects of medications** – Certain medications used for behavior issues, bladder control, or pain may interfere with sleep.
4. **Behavioral issues** – Anxiety, confusion, or agitation (especially in the evening – known as sundowning).
5. **Medical issues causing sleep problems:**
 - Chronic pain (e.g., arthritis)
 - Urinary tract infections (UTIs) – leading to frequent nighttime urination
 - Sleep apnea – brief pauses in breathing during sleep
 - Restless leg syndrome (RLS) – urge to move the legs, especially at night
 - Depression or anxiety – both are common in people with dementia
 - Gastroesophageal reflux (GERD) – may cause nighttime discomfort

Causes of Sleep Disturbance in Dementia Patients:

To people with dementia

- Negative impact on dementia progression.
- Increased risk of depression and declining physical health from lack of rest.

To Caregivers

- Declining physical health from lack of rest.
- Burnout and frustration due to constant supervision needs.
- Emotional strain in caregivers due to fear of nighttime wandering or injury.

Addressing Sleep Disturbances in Individuals with Dementia

1. Non-Pharmacological Management:

- Encourage active daytime routines such as light exercises, social activities, or walks.
- Establish a structured bedtime routine.
- Avoid long or late daytime naps that interfere with night sleep.
- Use bright light therapy in the morning to help set the body clock.
- Ensure the sleeping environment is calm, dark, and quiet.
- Offer light, calming snacks like a banana or warm milk if needed before bedtime.
- Avoid giving sugar, caffeine, or heavy meals in the evening.
- Ensure toilet access is easy to prevent nighttime anxiety or accidents.
- Monitor and treat any underlying medical issues that may disrupt sleep, such as pain or reflux.

2. Medication (only when necessary):

- Various medications, whether prescribed or available over the counter, can disrupt sleep. It's important to consult with your doctor about any prescriptions you may need, and to use them with caution, as they can elevate the risk of falling and confusion.



Reference:

Wong, R. & Lovier, M.A. (2023). Sleep disturbances and dementia risk in older adults: findings from 10 years of National U.S. Prospective Data. American Journal of Preventive Medicine. 64(6): 781-787.



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