

# Getting a good night's sleep for people with dementia

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Almost 300 years ago, Benjamin Franklin wrote the popular proverb “early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.” What can this catchy expression teach us about having a good night's sleep if you have a dementia? Turns out, quite a bit.

People with dementia often do not sleep well. But this doesn't have to be the case. “For individuals living with a dementia, help with getting a good night's sleep may be as simple as having a bedtime routine, keeping busy and having some bright light during the day,” said Dr. Cary Brown, the lead researcher of a recently launched website on sleep and dementia.

Brown and her team of researchers at the University of Alberta's Department of Occupational Therapy came to this conclusion after carefully reading dozens of studies on this topic. The researchers had one question to answer: how can we help people living with dementia get a better sleep without relying on pills?

## ***Poor sleep may lead to institutionalization***

“Sorting out the answers to these questions was like doing a jigsaw puzzle,” said Brown, “with lots of little pieces of information available for this rather large problem but the pieces had never been put together.” Given that the number of people living with some form of dementia is rapidly growing and sleep problems are very common for them, Brown felt it was important to look at this area more closely. If someone with dementia has poor sleep, chances are that their caregiver is also getting short changed with their own rest. Evidence shows that this scenario is the most common reason for people needing to move to an institution, said Brown.

## ***Poor sleep can cause problems with learning, memory and depression***

Not only will people with dementia and poor sleep possibly have to leave their homes, but the research has shown that they may also have other problems from not sleeping such as learning challenges, poor memory, depression and aggressive outbursts. And taking a pill is not necessarily such a good idea, said Brown. “Sleep specialists only recommend that people take hypnotics for a very short term, such as a couple of weeks, as they have a lot of side effects,” she said. Research has found that people who take drugs to help them sleep are more likely to fall because they can be groggy during the day. Also, when they do sleep it is not high quality and they do not feel well-rested in the morning. “This can also limit their ability to remember and learn new things,” said Brown.

After carefully evaluating 29 good quality research studies, Brown and her team were surprised with the final results. “The research we found is mostly about bright light strategies to help with sleep, but there is very little written about modifying the environment to help with this problem,” she said. Although the evidence is good for using bright light strategies, this approach is not always feasible and modifying the environment is pretty low tech and inexpensive, she said.

## ***Good sleep hygiene, activity and bright light exposure can help***

What are some of these practical and affordable approaches? Brown says that the evidence is good to try some of these ideas to help sleep if you have a dementia:

- Have a bedtime routine. This may be going to bed and waking up at the same time every day, listening to the same piece of music each night, and having the same light snack.
- Have a nice place to sleep. Ideally this would be a quiet and dark bedroom and with a minimal number of ready-lights (red, blinking LED lights on your TV, radio, alarm clock, etc.).
- Have activity during the day. Keeping busy and socializing will help you sleep at night, but limit your activity after dinner.
- Have bright light exposure during the day. It is best to be around natural day light. If this isn't possible, then you may find that using a bright-light box can help.

Poor sleep for people with dementia can start a vicious, downward cycle, said Brown. Breaking this cycle and helping people with dementia to sleep a bit better can improve their quality of life. "Sleep affects thinking, behaviour, as well as physical, cognitive and emotional function." The evidence is still evolving, but so far it provides support that there are many easy options to help people with dementia get a good night's sleep, she said.

For more information on what you can do to sleep better if you have a dementia, visit [www.sleep-dementia-resources.ualberta.ca](http://www.sleep-dementia-resources.ualberta.ca)