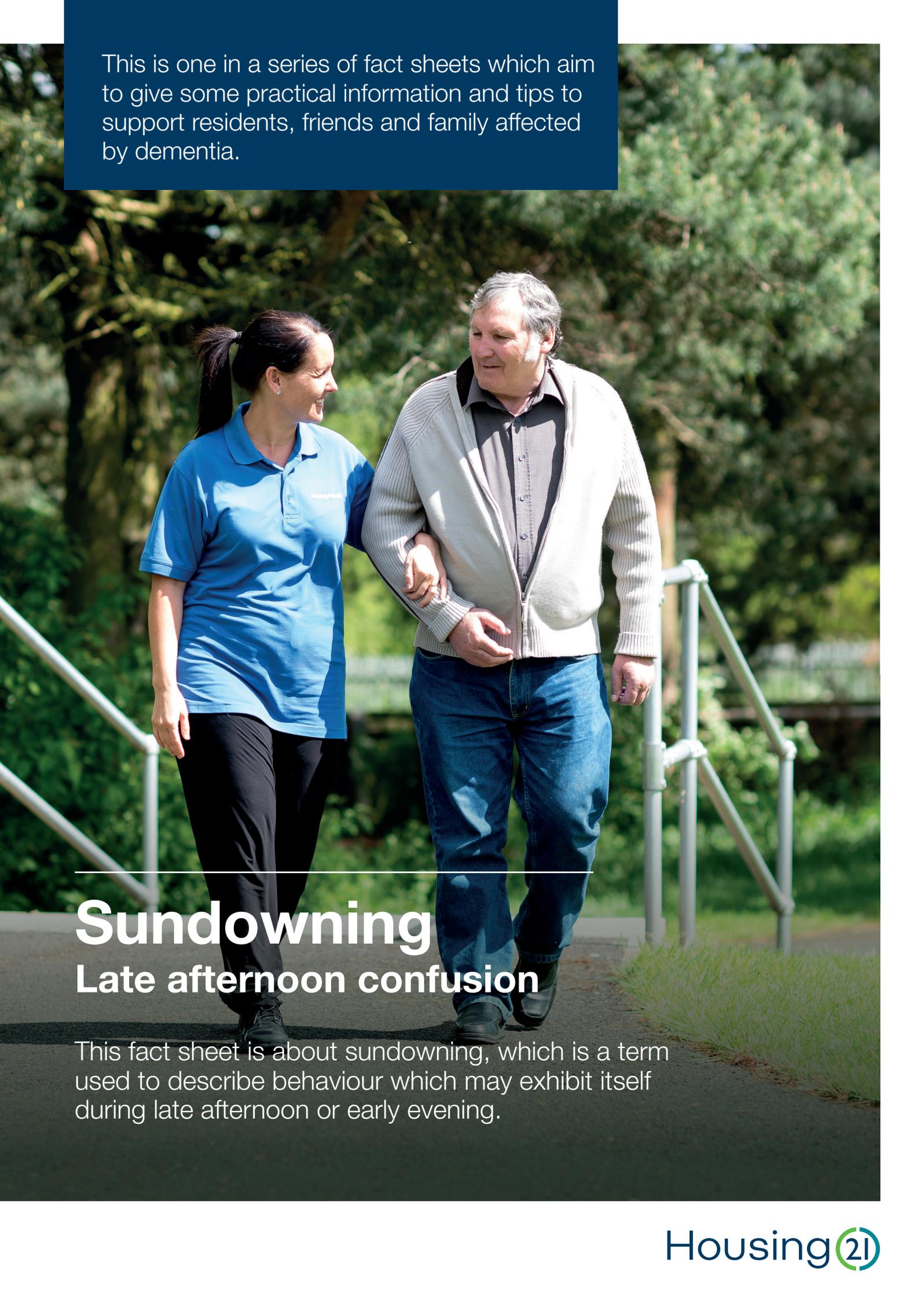


This is one in a series of fact sheets which aim to give some practical information and tips to support residents, friends and family affected by dementia.

A woman in a blue polo shirt and black trousers is walking on a paved path in a park, arm-in-arm with an elderly man. The man is wearing a light-colored cardigan over a dark shirt and blue jeans. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is filled with lush green trees and a metal railing runs along the path.

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# Sundowning

## Late afternoon confusion

This fact sheet is about sundowning, which is a term used to describe behaviour which may exhibit itself during late afternoon or early evening.

# People living with dementia may become more agitated or confused during this time and may exhibit aggressive behaviour.

People may say that they want to go home, or that they need to pick the children up from school. Other symptoms may include shouting, arguing, pacing or becoming confused by who people are. Much of what is said will often relate to their previous habits and activity at this time of day before they developed dementia.

This behaviour may continue for many months and often happens in the middle to late stages of dementia.

It can affect up to 20% of people living with dementia and can also affect older people without dementia.

## What causes sundowning?

- Fatigue – mental and physical
- Disturbance to the 24-hour 'body clock' that tells our bodies when to sleep, caused by the physical changes to the brain
- Hunger or thirst
- Physical pain
- Loss of routine at a previously busy time of day
- Too little or disturbed sleep
- Too little or too much light
- Prescribed medication wearing off
- Medications that worsen confusion and agitation

- Lots of noise
- Other conditions such as sight or
- Hearing loss
- A urinary tract infection can worsen sundowning

### Top tips

- Don't assume that all behaviour is due to sundowning, there may be another reason, and the person may be trying to communicate something to you.
- Keeping a diary of when it happens, and if possible what triggers it, as this may help to support the person during this difficult time.
- The person living with dementia may be feeling very frustrated at not being able to do what they have always done at this time of day.



## Some ways to manage sundowning

- ✔ Ask the resident if something has happened during the day. See if you can deal with the source of their distress
- ✔ Use distraction techniques such as going into a different room, make a drink, have a snack, turn some music on, or go out for a walk
- ✔ Talk in a slow, soothing way

## Preventing sundowning

- More activities during the day can help their body clock get back on track
- Take a walk outside or dance!
- Increase exposure to natural daylight or brighten the lights when someone feels confused
- Limiting the intake of caffeinated drinks and alcohol may help

- Limiting naps during the day, especially later in the day which may lead to better sleep at night
- Close the curtains and turn the lights on before dusk begins, to ease the transition into night-time
- Try and make their environment as much like home as you can with familiar objects, pictures etc
- Cover mirrors or glass doors. Reflections can be confusing for some people living with dementia
- Avoid large meals in the evening as this can disrupt sleep patterns, reducing caffeine and sugar may help too
- Introduce an evening routine keeping television or radio stations set to something calming and relatively quiet—sudden loud noises or people shouting can be distressing for a person with dementia



## Sundowning case study

John (not his real name) became more and more distressed, irritated and at times aggressive in the early evenings as daylight was failing, and his wife Joan (not her real name) was struggling to know what to do and how to deal with the situation. She felt that trying to calm John down and asking him to sit down was causing John to become even more agitated.

On discussing John's history, in particular his working life, Joan recalled that John had worked at the local machine shop as a toolmaker, and he had always been the last person to leave the building. He was responsible for ensuring that everything was shut away and that all windows and doors were locked before he left for home.

It was suggested to Joan that she walked around her home with John checking windows and doors in the early evenings to see if this would make a difference. John reacted well to this and he would ensure that every window and door was locked before settling down for the evening. Joan said that it didn't work every time, but probably nine times out of ten, and that John had become much more settled.

Over time John needed to do this less and less, but Joan always tried this in an evening if John was becoming distressed.

