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If you've ever enjoyed a nightcap to help you fall asleep only to find yourself waking up in the middle of the night, you're far from alone. Alcohol is a well-known sleep disruptor, yet many people swear by it to get to sleep faster. In this article, we'll explore why alcohol fragments sleep, how aging affects your sleep quality after drinking, and what you can do to improve your rest naturally—even after 50.

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## Alcohol and Sleep: The Good, the Bad, and the Interrupted

Many people notice that alcohol can help them fall asleep faster. This is because alcohol acts as a sedative initially, thanks to its effect on the brain's neurotransmitters. However, this initial sleepiness does not guarantee a good night's rest. Alcohol significantly **fragments sleep**, especially in the second half of the night.

### How Alcohol Fragments Sleep

Alcohol promotes faster onset of sleep by enhancing the brain chemical GABA, producing a calming effect. Early in the night, this may translate to quicker sleep onset and apparently deeper sleep. But as your body begins metabolizing the alcohol, it triggers a rebound effect:

- Increased brain activity
- More frequent awakenings
- Shallow, lighter sleep stages
- Reduced REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep

This disruption mainly occurs during the **second half of the night**, leading to fragmented sleep, early awakenings, and a groggy feeling the next day.



## Sleep Quality After Drinking: What Changes?

Sleep Aspect Normal Night After Alcohol Consumption Sleep Onset 10-20 minutes Usually faster Deep Sleep (Slow Wave Sleep) 20-25% of total sleep May increase early but decreases later REM Sleep 20-25% of total sleep Reduced, especially in the second half of the night Wake After Sleep Onset (WASO) Usually less than 15 minutes Increased, causing fragmentation

## Why Does Sleep Get Lighter and More Interrupted with Age?

If you're over 50, chances are you've noticed that your sleep patterns have changed. You might be experiencing more **second half of the night waking**, and deep sleep isn't as restorative as it used to be. Here's why:

### Decline in Deep Sleep with Age

As we age, the amount of deep, slow-wave sleep naturally declines. This is the "restorative" sleep stage that helps your body heal and your brain consolidate memories. Because you spend less time in deep sleep, your overall sleep quality can decline.

### Circadian Rhythm Shifts Earlier

Another common change is an "advanced" circadian rhythm, meaning your internal clock nudges earlier. Many adults past 50 start feeling tired earlier in the evening and wake up earlier in the morning—even if they want to sleep later. This shift can exacerbate difficulties staying asleep or cause unwanted early awakenings.



## How Morning Light Can Help Reset Your Sleep Clock

One of the simplest, most powerful tools to combat these sleep disruptions is **morning light**. Exposure to bright [https://www.herald-dispatch.com/sponsored/why-sleep-changes-after-50-and-what-helps/article\\_99e87611-bd1d-4af5-aaea-9210420304ba.html](https://www.herald-dispatch.com/sponsored/why-sleep-changes-after-50-and-what-helps/article_99e87611-bd1d-4af5-aaea-9210420304ba.html) light in the morning helps reset your circadian rhythm to a healthy schedule.

### Porch Coffee Routine: A Morning Light Fix

If you enjoy your coffee in the morning, consider stepping outside on your porch or near a window for 15-30 minutes while you sip. This natural light exposure signals your brain to suppress melatonin (the sleep hormone) and promote wakefulness during the day—making it easier to fall asleep at night on time.

Try to make this a daily habit, especially if you're dealing with sleep fragmentation or early morning waking after drinking or just in general. Consistent morning light can help shift and stabilize your internal clock.

## Sleep Aisle Traps: What to Avoid for Better Sleep

From my experience in community pharmacy sleep aisles, here are some quick reminders:

- **“Stronger” melatonin is not better:** High-dose melatonin won't necessarily fix sleep fragmentation and can cause headaches or weird dreams.
- **PM medications taken nightly without fall-risk assessment:** Sedatives or antihistamines at night may increase fall risk, especially in older adults.
- **Avoid alcohol as a sleep aid:** Despite initial drowsiness, alcohol usually degrades sleep quality.

## Takeaway: Why You Wake up After Drinking Despite Falling Asleep Faster

1. **Alcohol helps you fall asleep faster** by calming your brain, but metabolizing alcohol causes brain activity to increase later in the night.

2. **This leads to fragmented sleep and lighter stages** that are easy to wake up from, particularly during the second half of the night.
3. **Aging decreases deep sleep and shifts your circadian rhythm earlier**, making you more prone to awakenings and early morning wakefulness.
4. **Morning light exposure is a free natural fix** that can help reset your circadian rhythm and improve sleep quality over time.

## Final Thoughts

Instead of relying on alcohol as a sleep aid, build habits that support natural sleep cycles. Take advantage of natural morning light like a porch coffee session, stick to a regular sleep schedule, and be mindful how aging affects your sleep needs.

If you're still struggling with *sleep quality after drinking* or frequent nighttime awakenings, consider consulting a healthcare provider or a sleep specialist. They can help rule out other causes and suggest safe, effective interventions.

Remember, good sleep is the foundation for good health. Cheers to better nights and brighter mornings!

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