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# IMPROVING AGING-RELATED SLEEP



As we age, we tend to:

- Fall asleep earlier and wake earlier

- Get less deep (slow-wave) sleep

- Wake up more during the night (wakefulness)

- Feel sleepier during the day, but sleep lighter at night

Aging can definitely mess with sleep, and it is normal. The good news is there is a lot you can do to improve it. You may not sleep like you did at 25, but you can absolutely sleep deeply, consistently, and restoratively well into older age. Better sleep pays off big time for mood, memory, immunity, and energy.

Below we provide a research-grounded, up-to-date overview of the latest scientific findings on improving aging-related sleep and why they matter for your overall wellbeing.

## Sleep Quality and Brain Aging — It's More Than Just Rest

### Poor sleep may accelerate brain aging and risk for cognitive decline

➢ A large brain imaging study found that people with worse sleep patterns had brains that appeared older than their chronological age—suggesting poor sleep contributes to accelerated brain aging via inflammation and possibly impaired brain clearance systems.[1]

➢ Other research links chronic insomnia in older adults with a significantly elevated risk of dementia and cognitive impairment—emphasizing that insomnia is a modifiable factor with long-term implications for brain health.[2]

## Behavioral Sleep Interventions Work

### Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I)[2]

➢ CBT-I aims to change the thoughts and behaviors that maintain insomnia. It has been shown in clinical trials to greatly improve sleep outcomes, even in older people over ~70, and offers a scalable, non-drug intervention.

➢ One online CBT-I program significantly outperformed standard education in improving sleep quality for older adults.

## Exercise — One of the Strongest Non-Drug Sleep Enhancers

Multiple new meta-analyses and systematic reviews confirm exercise substantially improves sleep quality in older adults, including subjective sleep and objective measures like sleep efficiency and total sleep time.[3]

➢ Exercise also helps reduce insomnia severity and wake after sleep onset.

➢ Certain types — like Tai Chi and dance — may be particularly effective, likely by reducing stress and supporting circadian alignment.[4]

➢ Tai Chi also showed improvements in both sleep and memory performance.[5]

## Light Exposure and Circadian Rhythms

➢ A recent systematic review highlights the importance of light exposure for regulating sleep quality in elderly people, particularly because the circadian system weakens with age.[6]

➢ This aligns with growing evidence that exposing to morning light and avoiding bright light at night strengthen circadian rhythms — which are foundational for timely sleep onset and deeper sleep.

## Educational and Community Programs Can Help

➢ A 6-month sleep-focused educational intervention for community-dwelling older adults improved self-reported sleep quality and objectively measured sleep efficiency vs. controls.[7]

➢ What is particularly notable is that these programs are low-cost, scalable, and important for populations that may be homebound or without easy clinical access.

## Sleep Patterns and Successful Aging[8]

➢ Cohort studies show that stable, moderate sleep duration (neither too short nor too long) is associated with better overall health and successful aging trajectories. Fluctuating or too little sleep correlates with poorer long-term outcomes.

➢ Consistency in sleep habits matters just as much as duration.

## Best Practices to Improve Sleep as You Age

1. **Lock in Your Daily Circadian Rhythm**

   - Morning light exposure within 30–60 minutes of waking (outside, if possible, 10–30 min)

   - Dim lights 2 hours before bed; avoid bright overhead lighting

   - Same sleep and wake times—even on weekends (±30 min max)

2. **Protect & Boost Deep Sleep (the "anti-aging" sleep)**

   Deep sleep is when your brain clears waste and your body repairs tissue.

   - Regular exercise (especially resistance training)

   - Avoiding heavy meal & alcohol within 3 hours of bedtime

   - Cooler bedroom (60–67°F / 15–19°C)

   - 5–10 minutes of slow breathing before bed (4-6 breaths/min)

3. **Best Practice in Napping**

   - Keep naps 20–30 minutes

   - Nap before 2 pm

- Avoid long or late afternoon naps

- If nighttime sleep is bad, try skipping naps entirely for 1–2 weeks.

4. **Nutrition & Sleep-friendly Eating Habits**

Your metabolism and sleep are tightly linked as you age.

- Eat dinner at least 3 hours before bed

- No caffeine after 1–2 pm

- Alcohol = lighter, more fragmented sleep (even "just one drink")

- Avoid very salty or spicy dinners

**Helpful nutrients (preferably from food):**

- Magnesium (leafy greens, nuts)

- Tryptophan (eggs, turkey, yogurt)

- Glycine (bone broth; also helps body temperature drop)

5. **Manage Night Wakefulness**

**When you wake up:**

- Do not check the clock

- Keep lights dim or off

- Try slow breathing or a body scan

- If awake >20 min, get up and do something boring & calm (low light)

This retrains your brain not to panic about wakeups.

6. **Supplements (Use Carefully)**

- **Melatonin**: very low dose (0.3–1 mg), 2–3 hours before bed

- **Magnesium glycinate or threonate**

- **Glycine (3 g)** before bed for sleep quality

Avoid strong sleep pills unless medically necessary—they reduce deep sleep and increase fall risk.

7. **Daytime Habits That Improve Nighttime Sleep**

- Move your body daily

- Stay mentally engaged (learning, social interaction)

- Get daylight exposure throughout the day

- Reduce evening stress inputs (news, intense conversations)

## Red Flags to Check with a Doctor

Especially important as we age:

- Loud snoring or gasping (possible sleep apnea)

- Restless legs

- Frequent nighttime urination

- Chronic insomnia (>3 months)

- Excessive daytime sleepiness

## *CITATIONS*

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