

# Alcohol and Aging: When Less is Really More

For many years, moderate alcohol use—especially wine—was believed to support heart health and longevity. More recent research is challenging that idea, particularly for older adults. As we age, alcohol affects the body differently, and the line between “moderate” and “too much” becomes much thinner.

## Several age-related changes increase alcohol’s impact:

- Slower metabolism, causing alcohol to remain in the body longer
- Reduced muscle mass and body water, increasing alcohol concentration
- Greater medication use, raising the risk of interactions

Importantly, there is no single “safe” amount of alcohol that applies to everyone. How much alcohol negatively affects health depends on an individual’s body chemistry, medical conditions, medications, and personal sensitivity—making universal guidelines unreliable at the individual level.

## What the Latest Research Shows

Recent large studies suggest:

- No clear longevity benefit from moderate drinking
- Even low levels of alcohol increase the risk of certain cancers, including breast and digestive cancers
- Alcohol worsens sleep quality, balance, and reaction time
- Regular drinking is linked to faster cognitive decline and higher fall risk in older adults

Earlier claims of heart benefits are now thought to reflect lifestyle factors rather than alcohol itself.

## Signs Alcohol May Be Affecting Health

Alcohol-related effects often appear subtly with age. Common warning signs include:

- Poor or fragmented sleep after drinking
- Increased forgetfulness or mental fog
- Feeling unsteady or off-balance
- Worsening anxiety, mood changes, or irritability
- Drinking more often or more than intended

If symptoms improve when alcohol is reduced—or if cutting back feels difficult—those are meaningful signals.

## What “Lower Risk” Looks Like Today

Current guidance is shifting toward:

-  Fewer drinking days per week
-  Smaller portions (one standard drink or less)
-  Regular alcohol-free days



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As we age, alcohol’s risks increase while its benefits decline. Paying attention to how your own body responds may be the most reliable way to protect long-term health, brain function, and independence.