

Struggling to fall asleep or stay asleep? You're not alone. Insomnia affects millions, and many of us wrestle with the question: Should I focus on going to bed earlier, or try to wake up at the same time every day? The answer may surprise you—and it involves your body's natural rhythms, deep sleep patterns that change with age, and a powerful but often overlooked ally: morning light.

Understanding the Sleep Changes That Come With Age

Let's start with a little porch-coffee talk. Imagine our sleep patterns like a fading sunset—our deep, restorative sleep dims as we get older. This is because deep sleep, the stage when your body and brain truly repair themselves, naturally declines as we age.



- **Deep Sleep Declines with Age:** People over 50 often get less slow-wave (deep) sleep, making them more vulnerable to disturbances.
- **Lighter Sleep Is Easier to Interrupt:** When you sleep lighter, noises, light, or even subtle discomfort might wake you up or prevent you from falling back asleep.
- **Circadian Rhythm Shifts Earlier After 50:** Our internal clocks tend to shift forward, making us feel sleepy earlier in the evening and wake up earlier in the morning. This is called an "advanced sleep phase."

So, if you notice your grandma waking up with the sunrise and going to bed right after dinner, she's not just being old-fashioned—her internal clock is nudging her that way.

Wake Time Anchors Sleep More Than Bedtime

So where does this leave us on the bedtime vs. wake time debate? The current experts and sleep medicine research strongly suggest that *wake time is the anchor that holds your sleep schedule together*. Here's why:

1. **Your body's internal clock resets every morning:** Exposure to morning light helps "set" your circadian rhythm. This is why using your rise time as a consistent anchor point is critical.
2. **Bedtime variability weakens sleep quality:** Going to bed at wildly different times confuses your body's internal clock, even if you're waking up at the same time.

3. **Waking up consistently builds sleep pressure:** Regular wake times help build enough sleep pressure (the biological urge to sleep) to help you fall asleep more easily at night.

Think of it like this: if you always get up at 7 a.m., your body gets cues about when it needs to wind down for bed. But if your wakeup time varies from 5 a.m. on Monday to 9 a.m. on Saturday, your internal clock doesn't know when to expect sleep, which can worsen insomnia.

The Power of Morning Light — Your Free, Natural Fix

Here's my favorite "sleep aisle trap" to warn about: many people try to fix insomnia with supplements or meds without mentioning the importance of natural light exposure. Morning light is free, effective, and has virtually no side effects.

- **Morning Light Resets Your Internal Clock:** Natural sunlight tells your brain it's time to be alert, shifting your circadian rhythm appropriately.
- **It Boosts Mood and Energy:** Beyond sleep, morning light exposure increases serotonin levels, improving mood and helping fight the "I guess I just need less sleep now" mindset.
- **Easy to Get—No fancy equipment needed:** A simple 15-30 minutes outside on the porch with your coffee, even on cloudy days, can help.

If you're indoors for most of the day or wake up after sunrise, consider repositioning your schedule to catch more morning light. Some sleep clinic experts suggest leaving the blinds open overnight to simulate dawn, but real sunlight [decongestants and sleep](#) remains the best option.

How to Build a Consistent Schedule that Anchors Your Sleep

Consistency is king. To improve insomnia, you want to focus on these steps:

1. **Pick a Wake Time and Stick to It:** Yes, even weekends. This regularity stabilizes your circadian rhythm over time.
2. **Get Morning Light ASAP After Waking:** Open those curtains or step outside with your morning coffee (doesn't have to be fancy—classic porch coffee style works great).
3. **Wind Down at Night with a Relaxing Routine:** Dim lights, limit screen use, and avoid stimulants. This prepares your body for that earlier bedtime your clock is nudging you toward.
4. **Be Patient and Avoid "Sleep Aisle Traps":** High-dose melatonin or nightly sleep meds can mask underlying issues and increase fall risk, especially for older adults.
5. **Monitor for Bedtime Variability:** Aim to go to bed within a 30-minute window each night to reinforce the schedule.

Sample Sleep Schedule Anchored by Wake Time

Time	Activity	Rationale
6:30 AM	Wake up and expose yourself to morning light (outside porch coffee time)	Anchors circadian rhythm and boosts alertness
7:00 AM - 5:00 PM	Regular daylight exposure during the day; limit napping	Maintains alertness and proper sleep pressure
8:30 PM	Begin quiet pre-sleep routine (dim lights, no screens)	Signals body to prepare for sleep
9:00 PM	Bedtime (within 30-minute window)	Consistent bedtime reinforces sleep schedule

When Bedtime Does Matter

While wake time anchors sleep, that doesn't mean bedtime can be totally ignored. Irregular or very late bedtimes — think midnight one night and 10 p.m. the next — disrupt sleep continuity. Plus, if you're shifting your wake time earlier due to circadian changes, aim to adjust bedtime accordingly rather than forcing a late bedtime that shortens your total sleep time.

So, bedtime variability is another factor to monitor. Too much irregularity can lead to fragmented, lighter sleep that's easy to wake from.

Takeaway: Focus on Consistent Wake Time, Light Exposure, and a Steady Bedtime

Here's the bottom line I shared with a primary care doctor during an interview in our small Appalachian town: **Wake time anchors sleep. Bedtime variability undermines it.** Use morning light as your free and effective daily reset. And be patient—your internal clock may take a couple weeks to settle into a more restful rhythm.

Before considering high-dose melatonin or nightly medications, ask yourself, "What time do I take it?" and be honest about your wake time consistency and light habits. These simple, natural changes often make the biggest difference.



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