

Drinking alcohol after 40 gets more complicated

By Andrea Petersen, Wall Street Journal

When you're in your 40s, it's pretty common to need reading glasses. You might need smaller wine glasses, too.

That's because alcohol hits people harder in their 40s and 50s than it did during their 20s and 30s. The reasons for this include changes in body composition to brain sensitivity and liver functioning. Lifestyle factors are at play, too. And since people tend to take more medications—both prescription and over-the-counter—as they age, there are more chances for uncomfortable and even dangerous booze-drug mixing.

“All of the effects of alcohol are sort of amplified with age,” says David W. Oslin, a professor of psychiatry at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. “Withdrawal is a little bit more complicated. Hangovers are a little bit more complicated.”

Part of the issue is that people in their 40s and older simply tend not to drink as much or as often as those in their 20s and 30s, which lowers tolerance. “You're becoming more work-oriented, more family-oriented,” says Robert Pandina, director of the Center of Alcohol Studies at Rutgers University.

So when you do drink “you might have a more sensitive response to alcohol because you've lowered your exposure to alcohol over all.”

Some people swear that only certain types of alcohol—red wine, tequila—are a problem. Generally, doctors say there's little science indicating that some drinks make people drunker or lead to more miserable hangovers. It is true, however, that people at any age can develop sensitivities to sulfites and

tannins in wine, which can cause headaches and an upset stomach, Pandina says. And the carbonation in sparkling wines or even in mixed drinks like whiskey and Coke “seems to increase how rapidly alcohol is absorbed,” says Reid Blackwelder, president of the American Academy of Family Physicians and a practicing family doctor in Kingsport, Tenn.

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