

Let's Spill the Tea on Tea

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Tea is the second most consumed beverage in the world after water. It is made from steeping dried parts of a plant in water. True tea uses leaves from the tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*. Tea drinking dates back thousands of years originating in China. The practice of drinking tea spread Westward and, eventually, tea seeds were brought to North America.

Camellia sinensis is an evergreen shrub or small tree. Leaves are typically harvested in early spring when they begin to emerge. Green, black, white, and oolong teas all come from this tea plant. The type of tea is determined by the age and processing of the tea leaves, which includes drying and fermenting. These teas are often praised for their health benefits.



Benefits of Tea Consumption

The medicinal use of tea dates back thousands of years. Research has shown that regularly drinking tea is linked to health benefits including reducing the risk of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. This is primarily because of the antioxidant properties of the tea leaves. Flavonoids are the type of antioxidant found in tea. Other terms for these compounds include tannins, polyphenols, and catechins. They help protect us from potentially harmful molecules in our bodies that may lead to chronic health issues. Drinking tea on a regular basis is linked to many health benefits, but more research is needed to understand how much tea consumption leads to these benefits.

Tea Choices

The processing of the leaves of the tea plant determines the type of tea. While they all come from the same plant, there are differences in their flavor, caffeine content, and how they are used.

Black tea is made from larger older tea leaves that have been dried and fermented. Black tea has an intense bold flavor. Common black teas include Earl Grey, English Breakfast, and Orange Pekoe. In the Southern United States, black tea is often served over ice and may be sweetened with sugar.

Green tea has minimal processing resulting in its delicate flavor and light green color. It is made from smaller young leaves and leaf buds from the tea plant. Green tea has been found to have more

antioxidants than black and oolong teas. Matcha is a kind of green tea made of ground up tea leaves.

Oolong tea (red tea) is also made from the older and larger leaves but is briefly fermented, giving it a lighter, fruitier flavor. It contains caffeine, but a lower amount compared to black tea and green tea.

White tea is the mildest tea in terms of taste and caffeine content. It is the least processed tea and is made from the buds of the tea plant.



Types of Tea

Tea often comes as loose leaves or in pre-packed tea bags. Loose-leaf teas consist of whole or larger pieces of tea leaves. Minimal processing and larger leaf size allow for a higher concentration of the beneficial components found in tea. Bagged teas consist of ground tea leaves. The processing of these tea leaves may reduce the polyphenol content. Additionally, the tea bags may absorb some of the beneficial components reducing the number of polyphenols in your cup.

Bagged teas often come at a lower price on the shelf; however, you may be paying for less tea overall. Bagged varieties often offer individual servings. Loose leaf requires the additional step of separating the tea into servings and may require additional equipment. However, loose-leaf teas may provide more servings than the equivalent bagged option. Consider these factors when comparing price points.

Caffeine Considerations

Typically, tea contains about half as much caffeine as a cup of coffee or less, but the amount depends on the type of tea. Too much caffeine can disrupt your sleep and may lead to nausea, abdominal issues, and muscle pain. Some health conditions, including anxiety, pregnancy, or lactation, may need you to monitor or limit caffeine intake. Additionally, caffeine may interact with some medications.

Discuss possible interactions between caffeine and prescription medications with your health-care provider or pharmacist.

Herbal Teas

Herbal teas are not made from *Camellia sinensis* and do not necessarily provide the same nutrients. Herbal teas are made from roots, leaves, flowers, and other parts of plants. The compounds provided from herbal teas depend on the type of plant used to make the drink. Herbal teas do not contain caffeine and are often consumed for their calming benefits in addition to their therapeutic claims. Some common herbal teas and their health claims are listed below.

- **Chamomile tea** may improve sleep quality.
- **Peppermint tea** may help with an upset stomach or aid in digestion.
- **Ginger tea** may reduce mild nausea.

Tea can be an additional source of antioxidants in a balanced diet and provide hydration. You can enjoy it hot, plain, or with some milk. You can also serve it chilled as a refreshing pick-me-up. Consider what else is going into your tea. Sweetened and flavored teas often contain added sugars. Enjoyed for thousands of years, tea has a delicious taste, and its potential health benefits make this drink even more satisfying.

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