

For me tea is a gentle pick me up, far preferable to the intense rather manic kick of coffee. I’d like to share my enthusiasm (or is that a caffeine addiction?) and a little about tea with you, particularly some of its health benefits. It can help your heart, brain and teeth and has also generated interest for its possible anti- cancer properties.

According to legend, in 2737 BC, the Chinese emperor Shen Nung was sitting beneath a tree while his servant boiled drinking water, when some leaves from the tree blew into the water. Shen Nung, a renowned herbalist, decided to try the infusion that his servant had accidentally created. The tree was a *Camellia sinensis*. It has since been used in China as a medicinal remedy with a bitter, sweet cooling nature.



There are 4 main types of tea - white, green, oolong and black - all produced in different ways from the same plant:

* **White tea** is unfermented, using the youngest leaves and buds, and has the most delicate flavour.
* **Green tea** is unfermented and made from older leaves with a more robust flavour.
* **Oolong tea** is partially fermented from a subspecies with a thicker waxier leaf.
* **Black tea** is more fully fermented. We tend to drink mainly black tea here – English Breakfast, Earl Grey, Lapsang Souchong are all examples - with milk, which we then rather confusingly call white tea.

**The health benefits of tea**

The Chinese have long espoused the health benefits of green tea and as a result green tea has been the focus of most research. All 4 types of tea contain similar overall amounts of the beneficial flavonoids and are believed to share many of the same health benefits, but green tea has a higher level of one particular group of flavonoids, called catechins, which are believed to provide tea with much of its antioxidant properties. Some benefits are also completely removed when milk is added, which may also explain why green tea is generally considered healthier.

So what are the health benefits?

* **Heart Health** - A number of recent studies suggest that tea may help to decrease the incidence of heart attack and strokes by reducing cholesterol in the blood, improving the function of blood vessels, reducing blood pressure and inhibiting inflammation that can contribute to atherosclerosis.
* **Oral Health** - Several studies have suggested that regular tea drinking may reduce the number of dental cavities. Tea has also been shown to increase the acid resistance of tooth enamel and to help prevent harmful bacteria from sticking to the teeth. It is also believed to have **antiviral** and **antibacterial** properties which contribute to improved oral hygiene.
* **Brain Health -** Preliminary research into green tea has shown that it may help to prevent and slow the development of dementia including Alzheimer’s disease.
* **Possible Anti-Cancer Properties** – According to the Cancer Research website “some laboratory studies have shown that extracts from green tea can stop cancer cells from growing. While these lab results are encouraging, we need evidence from human studies to prove them. In 2012 an American study looked at giving a green tea extract to 42 patients with a type of leukaemia called chronic lymphocytic leukaemia. The people in the trial were not taking any other kind of treatment. The researchers found that a third of the patients had a reduction in the number of leukaemic cells and their lymph nodes shrank. This is a small trial but the results are promising. Larger trials before we know whether green tea or its extracts can help people with cancer.”
* It is reputed to **reduce fatty deposits in the liver** and to help with **immune function**.

**How much tea is good for you?**

Hard to say as it varies according to the type of tea and brewing method but as a rough guide about 3 - 5 cups a day is considered about right. Use a lighter tea, cooler water and a shorter brew for a weaker cup. Ideally, it should be organic to avoid ingestion of pesticides and other chemicals.

Tea may interfere with iron absorption. To mitigate these effects avoid tea for 30 minutes before and one hour after meals, especially if your iron levels are on the low side.

Green tea should be consumed in moderate amounts **if you are trying for a baby or while you are pregnant** as it contains higher levels of the catechins which interfere with the absorption of folic acid. Limiting your daily intake of green tea to a maximum of 2 cups will help to avoid interference with folic acid absorption. Limiting your intake of all tea to no more than 2 cups a day will help to keep your caffeine levels down (see below). You may prefer to avoid tea, coffee and other caffeinated drinks altogether while trying for a baby or during your pregnancy.

**Caffeine and other active ingredients**

I was long under the impression that green and white tea contained less caffeine than black tea, another reason I switched when pregnant, but in fact the differences are minimal. However, tea typically contains less than half the caffeine of a cup of coffee and most of the caffeine is released in the first 30 seconds of brewing. So if you want to cut down on caffeine, steep for 30 seconds, throw away the water and steep the leaves or bag in fresh water.

Tea also contains an amino acid, L-Theanine, with some interesting properties. It increases the generation of Alpha waves in the brain which are associated with alert relaxation, and are usually most active when we are sitting quietly with our eyes closed. The influence of L-Theanine may explain the milder stimulant effect of tea, compared to coffee. I certainly find it hard to follow a clear train of thought after drinking coffee, whereas tea gives a more sustained, focused concentration.

**Come and drink tea at Feast**

At our **Open Day at Feast on Sunday 2nd October** we shall be brewing up a variety of organic green and white teas for you to try, ethically sourced by Qi Teas from small independent farmers in the Yellow Mountains of Southern China. Please drop by and try some. I don’t sell them and have no commercial interest in the company, I just like their tea and would like to share my enjoyment with you.