Tea vs Coffee

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea vs coffee, in summary:** The two daily stimulant drinks compared on caffeine, L theanine, polyphenols, fluid intake, stomach, sleep and cost per cup, plus how to switch between them. The differences are real but smaller than the usual framing suggests.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in February 2026.

Tea has about half the caffeine of coffee but adds L-theanine, so the result is smoother, longer-lasting energy with less of a crash. Tea is cheaper per cup, carries different antioxidants, hydrates about as well as water, and (in the British context) is more cultural staple than mere drink. Coffee delivers the stronger immediate kick. Most people benefit from drinking both.

The basic comparison

Feature	Tea (black)	Coffee (drip)
Caffeine per cup	40-50mg	80-130mg
L-theanine	10-30mg	0mg
Antioxidants	Polyphenols, theaflavins	Chlorogenic acids
Per cup price	6-15p	15-30p
Hydration	~90% of water	~85% of water
Effect curve	Smoother, longer	Sharper, shorter
Crash	Mild	Pronounced

The caffeine difference

Coffee has roughly 2-3x more caffeine than tea per cup, so the strong morning hit comes faster from coffee. The tea hit is gentler.

Per dose:

- Cup of tea (200ml): 40-50mg caffeine
- Cup of coffee (200ml drip): 80-130mg caffeine
- Espresso single (30ml): 60-80mg caffeine
- Matcha (1 serving): 50-70mg caffeine

The L-theanine difference

L-theanine is an amino acid almost unique to tea, and it shapes the caffeine effect:

- Smooths out the caffeine peak.
- Takes the edge off the jitters some people get from caffeine.
- Supports alert focus without the edge.
- Slows caffeine absorption slightly.

The result: tea drinkers often report a different subjective experience from coffee drinkers, even at equivalent caffeine doses.

The cost difference

Tea per cup

- 240-bag Yorkshire Tea: 6-8p per cup
- 80-bag Earl Grey: 10-15p per cup
- Specialty matcha: 50-80p per cup
- Premium loose leaf: 30-50p per cup

Coffee per cup

- Instant supermarket: 5-10p per cup
- Filter at home: 15-25p per cup
- Bean coffee at home: 20-40p per cup
- Cafe espresso: £2.50-4.00

For mass-market everyday drinking, mainstream tea is cheaper. For specialty, the two are similar.

The hydration difference

Both hydrate. Tea hydrates very slightly better than coffee (less caffeine means less diuretic effect).

- Tea: ~90% of water hydration
- Coffee: ~85% of water hydration

The practical difference is minimal, so drink either confidently. More on tea hydration.

The antioxidant difference

Both contain antioxidants, but different ones:

- **Tea:** catechins (green), theaflavins (black), plus L-theanine.
- **Coffee:** chlorogenic acids, and caffeine itself.

Both are well researched; the compounds differ, but neither drink loses out here.

Sleep impact

Tea's lower caffeine and its L-theanine mean less sleep disruption from late-day cups. Coffee at 4pm affects sleep more than tea at 4pm for the same person.

Practical guidance:

- Cut coffee by 2pm if sleep is sensitive.
- Cut tea by 4pm if sleep is sensitive.
- After those times, decaf tea or a herbal keeps the habit without the caffeine.

Stomach impact

Coffee is more acidic and harder on the stomach; tea is gentler. People with sensitive or acid-prone stomachs often find tea easier to drink than coffee.

Cultural context

UK

Tea is the cultural staple. "Putting the kettle on" carries social weight, and daily tea is a national rhythm.

Italy and Southern Europe

Espresso culture dominates; tea is less prominent.

Northern Europe

Coffee dominant (Scandinavia has the highest per-capita coffee consumption).

East Asia

Tea is the cultural staple, with coffee growing rapidly.

USA

Coffee dominant in most regions; specialty tea growing in coastal cities.

Use cases for each

Choose coffee for

- A strong, immediate caffeine hit.
- Pre-workout (higher caffeine, bigger performance benefit).
- A morning kickstart when grogginess is severe.
- Espresso-tradition cultural moments.

Choose tea for

- Smoother, sustained focus.
- Fewer jitters, less crash.
- Evening or late-day caffeine without sleep disruption.
- Stomach sensitivity.
- A British cultural habit.
- A cheaper everyday daily drink.
- Decaf substitution (decaf coffee is generally less successful than decaf tea).
- Hydration with a little caffeine.

Drinking both

Most British coffee drinkers also drink tea, and the two complement each other:

- Morning coffee for the strong start.
- Mid-morning tea for the sustained focus.
- Lunch water.
- Afternoon tea for the L-theanine lift.
- In the evening, decaf tea or a herbal gives you the cup without disturbing sleep.

Switching from coffee to tea

Some people switch entirely. The transition:

1. Replace one daily coffee with strong black tea.
2. Notice the slight caffeine reduction (manage it with a rest day if needed).
3. Keep swapping over 1-2 weeks.
4. End with most or all coffee replaced by tea.

Many former coffee drinkers report fewer jitters, better sleep and lower cost. Some miss the strong morning hit, in which case matcha gives an equivalent caffeine punch.

FAQ

Tea or coffee? Both. Coffee for the strong hit, tea for the sustained focus.

Which is healthier? Both are well researched and broadly fine. They carry different polyphenols.

Which has more caffeine? Coffee, roughly 2-3x more per cup.

Better for sleep? Tea, less caffeine, less sleep disruption.

Cheaper? Mainstream tea. Specialty pricing is similar.

Curator's note: tea and coffee aren't competitors, they're complementary tools. Coffee for the morning hit; tea for the sustained focus. Most British people benefit from both. The L theanine in tea is the real difference. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Reference noted

- EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine (2015)
- NHS guidance on caffeine

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Switching to tea? £35, about two or three good bags, gets free UK delivery. A small first order of tea beats one big splurge.

Tea reading

For category context see the black tea fundamentals, the green tea overview, and the caffeine guide. For brand picks see the PG Tips, Yorkshire Tea, and Twinings pages. For tea-coffee hybrids see the chai latte and matcha guides.

The bottom line on tea vs coffee

Both are useful daily stimulant drinks; both count toward your fluid intake; both deliver real polyphenols. The case for tea is the gentler caffeine curve (L-theanine), lower cost per cup, an easier time for the stomach, and an easier evening cut-off. The case for coffee is a stronger morning kick and richer flavour in specialty brewing. Most British households drink both at different times of day, which is the rational pattern.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

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