Does Tea Go Off?

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Does tea go off, in summary:** Dry tea does not go off, it goes dull; only damp tea really spoils and must be binned. How to tell stale from spoiled, and the one real exception.

"Does tea go off" deserves a clear two part answer, because the everyday fear and the real risk are different things. This sits beside does tea expire and can old tea make you sick.

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

Dry tea: it goes dull, not off

Tea is dried plant matter. Kept properly dry it does not putrefy or become toxic; it loses aromatics and flavour. A year old, well stored tea is safe but tired, not spoiled. So in the everyday sense most people mean, no, dry tea does not "go off", it goes flat.

The real exception: moisture

Damp is the one way tea goes off for real. Tea is hygroscopic, it draws water from humid air, and damp leaf can grow mould. Mouldy tea, fuzzy, musty, clumped, or sour smelling, has actually spoiled and must be binned, no rescue, no "brew it strong", see can old tea make you sick.

How to spot spoiled vs stale

Stale: dull look, faint or no aroma, flat brew, still safe. Spoiled: visible mould, musty or off smell, clumping, dampness, throw away. If you are seriously unsure about the smell or the look, bin it; tea is cheap and the doubt is not worth it.

Why kitchens cause it

Most "gone off" tea was stored badly: an open box by the kettle, a jar near the hob, a pouch that never resealed. Steam and humidity did the damage. The fix is mundane, an opaque airtight tin in a cool dry cupboard, see how to store tea.

Flavoured and herbal notes

Flavoured teas lose their added aromatics first, so they taste "off" in the disappointing sense sooner, though still safe if dry. True herbal tisanes follow the same rule: dry equals dull not dangerous, damp equals bin it, see herbal tea for what they actually are.

Bottom line

Dry tea does not go off, it goes boring. Damp tea does go off, and it goes straight in the bin. Manage moisture and the question almost never arises, see how to keep tea fresh.

Stale versus spoiled, at a glance

	Stale (quality)	Spoiled (safety)
Cause	Time, air, light, heat, odour transfer	Moisture, damp storage, condensation
Smell	Faint, flat, "nothing much"	Musty, cellar-like, sour or mouldy
Look	Normal, perhaps slightly dull	Visible mould, fuzzy spots, odd clumping
The cup	Weak and lifeless but harmless	Off-tasting; do not drink
What to do	Use more leaf, steep longer, or replace	Throw it away, no debate

Want to actually buy a good one?

With fresh and spoiled now easy to tell apart, the next purchase is a tea you choose for the cup it makes. The products on show here were matched to the question of tea going off, so look at those first. To see the wider range, browse tea and herbal infusions at teas.co.uk or the full tea shop. Let the taste and the description steer you, keep an eye on what each cup costs, and know that UK orders above £35 incur no delivery charge.

Browse the tea range

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teas · Try your storage on a cheap plain tea first. Trust it with something dearer once you are happy with how it keeps.

More storage reading

- Does tea expire
- Can old tea make you sick
- How to store tea
- How long tea lasts

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea

- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
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