Why Does My Tea Taste Bad? A Diagnostic Checklist

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Why tea tastes bad, in summary:** Tea tasting bad? A UK diagnostic checklist: water, temperature, time, freshness, kettle, leaf, milk. Identify the issue and fix it.

If your tea tastes bad with decent leaf, the fault is almost always one of a short, fixable list, and water leads it. This sits beside best water for tea in the water cluster.

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

1. The water

The most common culprit. Hard water mutes and flattens, chlorine adds a pool note, stale or reboiled water dulls everything, see does water quality affect tea. Fix the water first; it is most of the cup, see filtered water for tea.

2. The temperature

Boiling water scorches green and white tea into bitterness; under hot water leaves black tea weak and sour. Match temperature to type: black wants near-boiling, green and white roughly 70 to 85C, see the water temperature guide.

3. The steep time

Over steeping pulls harsh tannin; under steeping gives thin, sour tea. Time it deliberately rather than letting the bag stew while the morning runs away: roughly black 3 to 4 minutes, green 2 to 3, white 4 to 5, herbal 5 to 7.

4. Stale or wrong stored leaf

Old or badly stored tea brews flat and characterless even done right, see how long tea lasts. Damp or musty leaf tastes wrong and should be binned, see can old tea make you sick.

5. A tainted kettle or pot

Heavy scale, a kettle that smells, or a pot that carried something strongly flavoured all transfer into tea. Descale and keep tea kit tea only, see limescale and tea.

6. Too little or too much leaf

Weak, watery tea is often simply under dosed; harsh, overpowering tea over dosed. Set the dose deliberately, especially with loose leaf.

7. The milk or the order

Off or over much milk, or milk drowning a delicate tea, can be the whole problem. Some teas want no milk at all; let the tea lead.

The clear takeaway

Run the list top down, water first. Nine times in ten the bad cup is water, temperature or staleness, and all three are cheap to fix, see best water for tea.

The essentials: Why your tea tastes bad checklist

Suspect	Quick test	Fix
Water	Hard water film on cup? Chlorine smell?	Brita-filter your tap water
Temperature	Brewing green tea with boiling water?	Drop to 75-80C for green/white tea
Steep time	Bag left in cup over 5 minutes?	Time it; remove on schedule
Stale leaf	Pack opened over 6 months?	Replace with fresh stock
Tainted kettle	Heavy limescale or stored stagnant water?	Descale; use freshly drawn water
Leaf quantity	Two bags in one mug? Heaped spoons?	One bag per 200ml; one level teaspoon loose
Milk wrong	UHT? Long-life? Wrong fat content?	Use fresh whole or semi-skimmed
Brewing order	Milk in first then water?	Brew tea first; add milk after the bag is out

When the basics don't fix it

Two finer points catch people out. Milk: UHT and long-life have a faintly cooked note, fresh whole or semi-skimmed is cleaner, and among plant milks oat suits the carefully chosen range while soy can curdle in very strong tea and almond can read sweet-bitter; add the milk after the tea, not before. And if you have worked through all seven suspects and the cup is still wrong, the usual remaining causes are a brand quietly reformulating its blend over the years, a change in your own palate (after illness, in pregnancy, or with age), or simply a mismatch between the tea and what you now like, fixed by trying a different type rather than giving up on tea.

What to buy

If water is the problem, a Brita filter jug (£25 to £40); if the leaf is stale, replace it with fresh Yorkshire Tea, PG Tips or Twinings English Breakfast; if the kettle is scaled, a descaler; and for green and white tea a variable-temperature kettle takes the guesswork out.

Related on the wiki: Why Does Hotel Tea Taste Bad.

Reference noted

- NHS: Foods to avoid in pregnancy

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Fix the brewing on cheap tea first, and stay cheap until something stops you. Most rich teas reward patience, not budget.

More brewing reading

For specific symptom diagnostics see why does my tea taste bitter, why does my tea taste like water, and why does my tea taste different. For water context see the best water for tea and filtered water for tea guides. For brewing technique see how to brew tea.

More related guides

- Why Does Tea Taste Different in Different Places?
- Can Tea Go Bad?

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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