Is Sun Tea Safe? Risks and Better Methods

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Sun tea safety, in summary:** Sun tea has a real, if modest, food safety concern: brewing in warm water at 20 to 40C sits in the bacterial danger zone. Fridge cold-brew gives a similar cup without the risk, and suits the UK climate better anyway.

"Sun tea" is nostalgic, but it carries a food safety issue worth stating clearly. This sits in the iced-tea cluster beside flash chill tea.

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

Food safety note: tea brewed in warm, not hot water (such as classic "sun tea") can grow bacteria. The safer methods are fridge cold brew or hot brew then chill. General information only.

What sun tea is, and the risk

Sun tea is tea left to steep in a jar in the sun for hours, brewing in warm rather than hot water. That warm-water step is the problem. The 20 to 40C range it sits in falls inside the 4 to 60C "danger zone" where bacteria multiply rapidly, and at around 30C organisms such as Alcaligenes viscolactis can double every 20 to 30 minutes, so a four-hour brew can carry hundreds of times the starting bacterial load. The US CDC has documented sporadic cases of foodborne illness linked to home made sun tea, including salmonella and E. coli; the incidence is modest but real. The tannins in tea offer mild antibacterial activity, but not enough to remove the risk. This is a real, documented concern rather than scaremongering. For the safe way to make iced tea, see how to make iced tea.

Risk factor	Note
Brewing temperature	20-40C; FDA bacterial-growth danger zone
Most-implicated bacteria	Alcaligenes viscolactis; produces visible ropey slime
Vulnerable populations	Pregnant, young children, elderly, anyone with weakened defences
Visual warning signs	Cloudiness, ropey slime, off odour; discard if any present
Time limit if made	Drink within 2 hours of removing from sun; do not store
Container hygiene	Scrupulously clean glass jar essential before each batch
Safer method	Fridge cold-brew at 4C; meaningful safety upgrade
FDA position	Recommends against sun tea; cold-brew alternative endorsed

Warning signs: when to bin it

If you do encounter sun tea, a quick inspection settles it. Fresh tea should be clear and tea-coloured; cloudiness points to bacterial or yeast contamination. The clearest red flag is ropey slime, long sticky strings in the jar, which is the signature of Alcaligenes viscolactis. An off smell that is sour, fermented or yeasty, any white or coloured fuzz on the surface, fizziness, or a slimy mouthfeel all mean the same thing: discard it. The rule of thumb is simple. If it is anything other than clean, clear, tea-coloured liquid, do not drink it. The tea was cheap to make and foodborne illness is far worse value, so when in doubt, bin it.

Safer alternatives

The good news is that every cold-tea outcome sun tea offers can be reached more safely. The best route is fridge cold-brew: 8 to 12 hours at 4C with roughly 4 to 6 tea bags or 15g of loose leaf per litre, which carries no bacterial risk, gives a gentle cup and is independent of the weather. If you want the look of it, cold brew overnight in the fridge and then give it a brief finish on a sunny window sill, where the temperature only rises briefly. For speed, hot-brew at full strength for five minutes and chill in the fridge, since boiling water sterilises everything, or flash chill by pouring a double-strength hot brew straight over a glass packed with ice. Only true outdoor sun tea, three to five hours at 20 to 40C, carries the risk, so keep that one for nostalgia only. Build any of these from the loose-leaf range or the full tea shop, and see cold brew tea for the method.

Who should avoid it, and the UK angle

Anyone more vulnerable to foodborne illness, that is pregnant women, young children, the elderly and anyone with weakened defences, should avoid sun tea brewed warm entirely. The UK context makes the decision easy for everyone else too. UK summer afternoons often sit at 16 to 20C, below effective sun-tea brewing temperature, so the result is frequently weak, under-extracted tea rather than the sun-brewed character of the US tradition it came from. The UK Food Standards Agency does not specifically warn against sun tea the way the US FDA does, but general food-safety guidance aligns with preferring cold-brew for any cold-extracted drink. In short, sun tea is both less safe and less suited to the UK climate than fridge cold-brew, so most UK drinkers can skip the tradition with no real loss.

Reference noted

- NHS: Foods to avoid in pregnancy

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