Tea to Water Ratio: Strength Comes From Leaf, Not Time

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea-to-water ratio, in summary:** Ratio, not steeping time, is the real way to control strength. A baseline of 2 to 3g per 200ml Western, or 5 to 7g per 100ml gongfu; weighing beats teaspoons, and you adjust strength with leaf, not time.

Of the brewing variables, tea-to-water ratio is the one people guess at most and think about least, and the single most useful fact is that ratio, not steeping time, is the right way to control strength. Most people who want a stronger cup just leave the bag in longer, which mainly adds bitterness; the answer is to use more leaf and keep the time correct, and understanding that one distinction fixes a great deal of disappointing tea.

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

Why ratio is the real strength control

A tea's pleasant flavour compounds and its harsh, bitter ones extract at different rates: the good stuff comes out relatively early, the harsh tannic edge builds the longer the leaf sits. So brewing longer to get "stronger" tea largely means brewing more bitterness, not more of the flavour you want. Using more leaf for the correct time, by contrast, gives you more flavour and body at the same balance, a genuinely stronger but not harsher cup. As a rule of thumb, 4g steeped for three minutes is stronger and less bitter than 2g steeped for six. Strength should come from the amount of leaf, not from punishing a small amount of leaf with extra time.

The baseline ratios

Useful starting points, Western style: roughly 2 to 3g of loose leaf per 200 to 250ml cup (about a slightly heaped teaspoon for many teas, though light fluffy leaf weighs less per spoon than dense rolled leaf). A standard teabag is around 2g and designed for one mug. Gongfu style is deliberately far higher, often 5 to 8g in a small 100 to 150ml vessel, because it relies on very short, repeated steeps rather than one long one. Matcha is whisked rather than steeped, at roughly 1 to 2g per 60 to 80ml. Tisanes and big-leaf teas often need a bit more by volume because the same weight takes up more space. Treat these as starting points and adjust by about half a gram to a gram for your taste.

Why weighing beats the teaspoon

"One teaspoon per cup" is rough because leaf density varies enormously: a spoon of fluffy white tea or large oolong is far less tea by weight than a spoon of fine broken black, so a single teaspoon could be anywhere from 1g to 5g depending on the tea, giving a weak cup of one and a strong cup of another. If your tea is inconsistent for no obvious reason, the ratio measured by eye is usually the hidden cause. A cheap kitchen scale (around £10 to £15) removes the guesswork and is, after a variable-temperature kettle, the most useful low-cost upgrade to consistent tea, especially worth it once you are paying real money for the leaf.

How to scale it

Ratio scales with water volume, not with how strong you feel. For a bigger pot, increase the leaf in proportion to the water (so a 600ml pot for three cups takes around 6g), rather than brewing the same small amount for longer. For a weaker cup, use less leaf rather than a shorter-than-correct steep that under-extracts and tastes thin and sour. For a stronger cup, more leaf, same time. Milk and dilution are legitimate tools too: a strong, correctly timed brew loosened with milk or hot water is better than a stewed one. Iced tea is usually brewed at double strength to survive the ice; cold brew can use a lower ratio because the long, cold extraction is so gentle.

Does ratio change the health story

Only in dose, not in kind. More leaf means more caffeine and more polyphenols per cup, so a very strong brew is a larger serving of the same modest, real package, caffeine, polyphenols, hydration, no miracle, not a different or more "powerful" substance, and three weak cups and one strong cup land in a similar place over a day. The reason to get ratio right is flavour and consistency, with caffeine dose as a simple quantity footnote rather than a health claim.

Ratio by tea type

Tea	Ratio	Note
Black, Western	2 to 3g per 200ml	3 to 5 minute steep; the standard UK approach
Green, Western	2 to 3g per 200ml	2 to 3 minutes at 75 to 85C
White	3g per 200ml	Patient steep, generous leaf
Oolong, Western	3 to 5g per 200ml	Varies by oolong type
Oolong / pu-erh, gongfu	5 to 7g per 100ml	Short, repeated infusions
Gyokuro	5g per 50 to 80ml	Cool water, intense umami
Matcha	1 to 2g per 60 to 80ml	Whisked, not steeped
Herbal / fruit tisane	2 to 3g per 200ml	Longer steep, full boil

The one habit to carry away is to control strength with leaf, not time: start at the baseline, weigh rather than spoon, and nudge the ratio up or down by half a gram to suit your taste, reaching for a longer steep only when you genuinely want a different extraction rather than just "stronger". The companion steeping time and tea strength guides cover the other dials, and a leaf worth measuring is in the loose leaf range or the full tea shop.

Reference noted

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

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