Tea Steeping Time: Long Enough, Not Too Long

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea steeping time, in summary:** Time controls how far a tea develops, not its strength. The right window gives flavour and body before harshness; too long just adds bitterness. Use ratio for strength, time for character.

Steeping time is the variable people fiddle with most and understand least, and the single most useful correction is that time controls extraction completeness, not strength, and over-steeping mostly adds bitterness rather than flavour. Once you separate "long enough to develop" from "so long it turns harsh", the whole question of how long to brew tea becomes simple and type-driven rather than a matter of nervous guessing.

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

What steeping time actually does

During a steep, a tea's soluble compounds come out in a rough order: bright aromatics and sweetness relatively early, body and colour next, and harsh tannic astringency increasingly the longer it goes. The right time is the window where flavour and body have developed but harshness has not yet dominated. Too short and the cup is thin, pale and sourly underdeveloped; too long and it is dark, hard and bitter. Time is essentially how far along that extraction curve you stop, and different teas have very different ideal stopping points.

The type-by-type times (Western style)

Approximate but reliable, for normal one-pot or one-mug brewing. Robust black tea: 3 to 4 minutes. Delicate black or first-flush Darjeeling: 2 to 3 minutes. Green tea: 1 to 3 minutes (delicate Japanese greens at the short end). White tea: 3 to 5 minutes, and it is forgiving. Lightly oxidised oolong, Western style: 2 to 3 minutes. Herbal and fruit tisanes: 5 minutes or more, since they are hard to over-steep and usually under-steeped. These pair with the right temperature; time and temperature are partners, not substitutes.

Why "stronger" is the wrong reason to steep longer

This is the central candour, and it connects to the ratio question. Leaving the bag in for ten minutes does not give you a richer, fuller cup; it gives you a thin-bodied, very bitter one, because you have raced past the flavour window into pure astringency. If you want a stronger cup, use more leaf for the correct time, not the

same leaf for longer, so two bags for three minutes beats one bag for eight. The single most common bad tea habit in the world, the forgotten, over-stewed mug "for strength", is simply a misunderstanding of what time does.

Why gongfu times are so short

Gongfu brewing seems to contradict all this with steeps of seconds, and the reconciliation is simple: it uses a very high leaf-to-water ratio, so full flavour is reached almost immediately and a long steep would be instantly bitter. A short time there is not "weak"; it is the correct stopping point for that ratio, and many short infusions reveal layers a single long brew would blur. This shows the real principle: time is always relative to leaf quantity and temperature, not an absolute number, which is why a recipe that ignores ratio and temperature is incomplete advice.

Does steeping time change the health story

Only in degree. A longer steep extracts more polyphenols (and a little more caffeine, though most of the caffeine is out within the first minute or two), so a long brew is a somewhat larger dose of the same modest, real package, caffeine, polyphenols, hydration, no miracle, and an over-steeped cup is harsher, not healthier. The reason to get time right is flavour and balance, with extraction dose as a simple footnote rather than a health lever.

Steeping time by tea type

Tea	Western steep	Note
Robust black	3 to 4 minutes	Standard UK approach, full boil
Delicate / first-flush black	2 to 3 minutes	Over-steeping shows quickly
Green	1 to 3 minutes	Delicate greens at the short end, 75 to 85C
White	3 to 5 minutes	Forgiving, gentle extraction
Oolong	2 to 4 minutes	Varies by oxidation
Pu-erh	3 to 5 minutes	Many infusions possible
Herbal / fruit tisane	5 to 7 minutes	Hard to over-steep; usually under-steeped
Gongfu (any suitable leaf)	15 to 60 seconds	High ratio, many short infusions

The habit to keep is to time to the window and reach for more leaf, not more minutes, when you want strength: start at the type's range, taste, and stop while flavour is full but before bitterness takes over, then remove the leaves so the cup does not keep extracting. The companion tea-to-water ratio and tea strength guides cover the partner dials, and a leaf worth timing is in the loose leaf range or the full tea shop.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Drink what you like, not what the shelf says you should. Curiosity is the only reliable

guide.

More from the tea wiki

- Tea-to-water ratio
- Tea strength
- How to make tea
- Gongfu cha

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.



teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/