Tea Strength: Three Things 'Strong' Can Mean

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea strength, in summary:** "Strong" means three different things, flavour and body, bitterness and astringency, and caffeine. Most people want flavour, accidentally get bitterness, and rarely think about caffeine. Get strength from more leaf, not more time.

"I like strong tea" is one of the most common things people say about tea and one of the most ambiguous, so the single most useful move is to separate the three different things "strong" can mean: strength of flavour and body, bitterness and astringency, and caffeine content. They are related but not the same, and most disappointing "strong" tea comes from confusing them.

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

The three things "strong" can mean

First, flavour strength and body: a rich, full, intense cup with lots of taste and mouthfeel. Second, bitterness and astringency: the harsh, drying, tannic edge of over-extraction. Third, caffeine: the stimulant dose, which you cannot taste at all. People usually want the first, often get the second by accident, and rarely think clearly about the third. An account of "strong tea" is mostly about getting more of the first without the second, and being realistic about the third.

How to get strength without harshness

The core, and it echoes the ratio and time pages: real flavour strength comes from using more leaf, not from brewing a small amount for a long time. More leaf for the correct time gives an intense, full, satisfying cup at a good balance, so roughly 3 to 4g per 200ml rather than the usual 2 to 2.5g. The same small amount of leaf brewed extra-long gives a thin-bodied but very bitter cup, which many people mistake for "strong" when it is really just over-extracted. If your strong tea tastes hard and drying rather than rich and full, the fix is more leaf and less time, not the reverse, and choosing a tea with built-in body (a robust Assam-led blend) helps too.

Strength versus caffeine

A genuinely useful clarification: a tea tasting strong does not reliably tell you it is high in caffeine, and a mild-tasting tea is not necessarily low. Caffeine depends on the tea, the leaf, the amount used and the brew, not on how bold the flavour seems or how dark the cup looks; a delicate but bud-rich white tea can carry more

caffeine than a robust-tasting but modestly dosed black. So "I need a strong cup to wake up" conflates flavour and stimulant, which are not the same lever.

The role of milk and dilution

Milk and water are legitimate strength tools, not admissions of defeat. The best route to a robust milky mug is a strong, correctly timed brew (plenty of leaf, right time) softened with milk, far better than a stewed, bitter brew used to "stand up to milk"; the milk's casein actually binds some of the tannins and smooths the cup. Likewise a too-strong cup is easily improved by adding hot water rather than by having under-brewed in the first place. Strength is something to dial with leaf quantity and then adjust, not to extract by punishment.

Does strength change the health story

Only in dose. A stronger (more leaf) cup is a larger serving of the same modest, real package, caffeine, polyphenols, hydration, no miracle, and a bitter over-steeped cup is harsher, not more potent in any beneficial sense. Total daily intake matters more than any single cup's strength. The reason to understand strength is getting a full, satisfying cup without harshness, with caffeine as a quantity footnote you control through how much leaf you use.

The three meanings at a glance

"Strong" means	Controlled by
Flavour intensity and body	Leaf quantity (ratio), and choosing a robust tea
Bitterness and astringency	Steep time and temperature (over-steeping causes it)
Caffeine (the stimulant)	Tea type, leaf and dose, not the bold taste
Smoothing a strong cup	Milk (binds tannins) or a splash of hot water

The habit to keep is to decide which "strong" you mean and reach for the right lever: more leaf for flavour and body, a shorter steep and cooler water to avoid bitterness, and the tea type for caffeine, with milk or water to fine-tune at the end. The companion tea-to-water ratio and steeping time guides cover the dials, and a tea with real body is in the English breakfast range or the full tea shop.

Reference noted

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

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