Can Tea Go Bad?

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Can tea go bad, in short:** Dry tea goes stale, not dangerous; brewed tea left standing is the real, modest hygiene case. Store dry tea well, treat leftover brewed tea as perishable.

"Can tea go bad?" deserves a clear split answer, because dry tea and brewed tea are completely different cases, and most worry attaches to the wrong one. The short version: dry tea very rarely becomes unsafe, it just goes stale and dull; brewed tea left standing is the real, if modest, hygiene case.

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

The short answer

Dry tea (loose or bags) does not really "go off" in a spoilage sense under normal storage; it loses flavour, aroma and colour over months to a year or two and becomes flat and disappointing, not dangerous. Brewed tea is the opposite: it is a perishable liquid, and tea left at room temperature for many hours, especially with milk or sugar, can grow microbes and should be discarded rather than drunk.

Why it actually happens

Dry tea fades because air, light, moisture and odour degrade its delicate aroma compounds over time, green tea and matcha fastest, sturdy black and dark teas slowest. It is staling, not rotting. Brewed tea is different because it is just nutrient-containing water at room temperature, exactly the conditions in which bacteria multiply, which is why a pot left overnight, or milky tea left out, is a real hygiene point, not scaremongering.

What to actually do

For dry tea: store it sealed, opaque, cool and dry, away from strong smells, buy modest amounts, and drink it reasonably fresh, especially green. If it smells musty or mouldy (a real storage failure in damp conditions) discard it, but ordinary "old" tea is just disappointing, not unsafe. For brewed tea: drink it fresh, refrigerate it promptly if cold-brewing or saving it, drink it within a day, and bin tea, especially milky tea, that has stood out for many hours.

Dry tea versus brewed tea

	Dry tea (loose or bags)	Brewed tea

What happens with time	stales: loses flavour, aroma, colour	perishable liquid, microbes grow at room temp
Timescale	months to a year or two	hours, faster with milk or sugar
Safety	flat and dull, not dangerous	discard if left standing many hours
The only real failure	musty/mouldy from damp storage, bin it	milky tea left out, ordinary food hygiene

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea

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