Steeping Times by Tea Type

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The headline:** Steeping chemistry; 80% caffeine extracts in 30 seconds, tannins build at 3-5 min, aromatics peak in first 2 min; per-family sweet spots vary.

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

Steeping time is the second of the two main levers in brewing, the first is temperature. Where temperature governs *which* compounds get extracted from the leaf, time governs *how much* of each. Get it wrong in either direction and the cup goes off target: too short and it's thin, too long and the tannins take over and you get a cup that grips the cheeks dry. The good news is that for most teas the right window is generously wide (usually a 60-second band, not a precise number); the bad news is that the window narrows for the more delicate teas (sencha, gunpowder, delicate oolongs), so a kitchen timer earns its space if you drink those.

This guide is the complete family by family steeping time map: which teas need which brewing duration, why, what happens if you over steep, and how to use re infusions to extend premium tea across multiple cups.

Family by family steeping times

Family	Time (first infusion)	Notes
Black tea	3 to 5 minutes	5 min if you take milk and want body. 3 min for a brisk afternoon cup
English Breakfast	4 to 5 minutes	Built for milk and a long steep
Irish Breakfast	4 to 5 minutes	Heavier Assam content benefits from full brewing
Darjeeling	3 to 4 minutes	Lighter character; oversteeping flattens the muscatel notes
Earl Grey	3 minutes	Bergamot oil sits on top; over steeping doesn't help and starts to extract bitterness from the bergamot rind
Green tea (Japanese sencha, gyokuro)	1 to 2 minutes	Short. Long greens get bitter fast

Family	Time (first infusion)	Notes
Green tea (Chinese gunpowder, longjing)	2 to 3 minutes	Slightly longer than Japanese; the leaves are tightly rolled and need time to open
Jasmine green tea	2 to 3 minutes	Allow time for the floral notes to develop
Matcha	n/a, whisked, not steeped	Whisk for 30 to 60 seconds in a W pattern until frothy
White tea	4 to 7 minutes	Forgiving. The catechin profile is mild, so longer steeps don't get harsh fast
Silver needle white	5 to 7 minutes	The most delicate tea; long brewing for full character
Oolong	2 to 3 minutes (Western brew); 30 to 60 seconds (gongfu)	Wide range. Lighter oolongs go shorter, darker ones longer
Tieguanyin (light oolong)	2 to 3 minutes Western; 30 sec gongfu	The floral character extracts quickly
Da Hong Pao (dark oolong)	3 to 4 minutes Western; 45 sec gongfu	The roasted character benefits from slightly longer brewing
Pu erh (shu)	30 seconds first steep, then 1 to 2 min	Always rinse first; pour boiling water on, dump after 10 sec, then brew. Wakes the leaf and rinses storage dust
Pu erh (sheng)	30 seconds first steep, then 1 to 2 min	Same approach as shu pu erh
Rooibos & redbush	5 to 7 minutes	Won't get bitter, so over steep is fine. Stronger = better
Honeybush	5 to 10 minutes	Naturally sweet; benefits from extended brewing
Chamomile	7 to 10 minutes	Cover the cup; volatile aroma compounds escape with steam
Peppermint	5 to 7 minutes	Cover during brewing for full menthol character
Ginger (fresh slices)	5 to 10 minutes simmer	Strong cups benefit from extended brewing
Echinacea	10 to 15 minutes	Active compounds extract slowly
Liquorice	8 to 10 minutes	The root needs extended brewing
Hibiscus	5 to 7 minutes	The colour extracts quickly; flavour develops over time
Fennel seeds	10 to 15 minutes	Crush the seeds first; longer brewing for full extraction
Fruit and herbal infusions	5 to 10 minutes	Dried fruit and flowers need time to release. No tannins to worry about

The chemistry of brewing time

Different compounds in tea extract at different rates:

- **First 30 to 60 seconds**: most caffeine, the brightest aroma compounds, light catechins. The cup at this stage is light, fragrant, sometimes thin
- **1 to 3 minutes**: full flavour development, balance of catechins and theaflavins, the "ideal" window for most teas. The cup tastes full but not heavy
- **3 to 5 minutes**: deeper character, more body, more tannin extraction. The right window for British black tea but starting to get bitter for green and white tea
- **5+ minutes**: heavy tannin extraction, astringency, bitterness, increasing depth. Suitable for rooibos and herbal infusions; produces over extracted cups for most true tea

The temperature interaction matters: at higher temperatures, all compounds extract faster, so brewing time should be shorter. At lower temperatures, brewing can extend. This is why green tea at 70 to 80°C brews for 1 to 2 minutes while black tea at 95 to 100°C brews for 3 to 5 minutes; the temperature difference shifts the optimal window.

The first cup vs rest rule

If you re infuse the same leaves (worth it for any decent loose leaf), the leaves are already wet and partially extracted. Add roughly 30 seconds to each subsequent steep:

- **First steep:** the recommended time above
- **Second steep** +30 seconds
- **Third steep** +60 seconds from the original. Often the best cup of the three for oolongs and pu erh
- **Fourth steep onwards** (oolong, pu erh), continue extending; some pu erh gives 8+ excellent infusions

Cheap teas exhaust on the first brew; their second cup is hot water with a hint of leaf. Better teas keep going for three or more. It's one of the most reliable cheap vs decent tells.

The gongfu approach: short multiple infusions

Traditional Chinese gongfu brewing uses dramatically shorter infusions with more leaf:

1. **5 to 7g of leaves** per 150ml of water (more leaf than Western brewing)
2. **Rinse the leaves:** brief water pour to wake the tea
3. **First infusion** 30 to 45 seconds
4. **Subsequent infusions:** slightly longer each round
5. **Multiple infusions** 6 to 10 cups from the same leaves

The gongfu approach particularly suits oolong (especially tieguanyin and Da Hong Pao), pu erh, and premium Chinese green teas. The character evolves across infusions; the multi cup session reveals different aspects of the tea than a single Western style brew. See the tieguanyin overview and the pu erh overview.

Why teabags brew faster

Most teabag tea is graded as "fannings" or "dust", the small particles left after the larger leaves have been sorted out. Smaller particles have more surface area exposed to water, so they release tannin and colour fast. That's why a teabag is brewed by colour ("until it's the right shade") in 90 seconds while loose leaf takes 4 minutes.

The downside: fannings extract everything (flavour AND tannin AND any dust) at the same speed. There's no second infusion option. The bag also restricts the leaf so it can't expand fully, so the cup is harsher than the same leaf brewed loose. Fine for convenience, not for nuance.

For the bag vs loose comparison see the tea bags vs loose leaf comparison.

Pyramid bags and tea temples

Modern pyramid bag formats (PG Tips pyramid, Teapigs tea temples) extend brewing time slightly compared to flat bags:

- Standard pyramid bags: 3 to 4 minutes (slightly faster than loose leaf, slower than flat bags)
- Premium tea temples (whole leaf inside): 3 to 5 minutes; closer to loose leaf brewing times

The 3D format gives leaves more circulation room than flat bags, slowing extraction slightly and producing more balanced cups. For drinkers wanting better than standard tea bag brewing without going to loose leaf, premium pyramid formats provide the practical middle ground.

Cold brew: the no time required option

Cold brewing produces a smoother, sweeter, lower caffeine cup with no steeping clock to watch. Drop loose leaf into cold water (about 1g per 50ml, same ratio as hot), seal in a jar, refrigerate for 6 to 12 hours. Strain. Drink chilled.

The cold extraction pulls less caffeine and less tannin than hot, so the result is mellower. Especially good for green teas (no risk of bitter) and white tea (the floral notes come through cleanly). Black teas work but lose their malt character. See the cold brew tea guide for the complete approach.

The signal that you've over steeped

The cup goes dry mouthed. That dry, slightly puckering grip on the inside of your cheeks after a sip is the tannins talking. Some people like it (a "brisk" Assam is meant to be mildly astringent); for most cups it's a sign to either steep shorter, use less leaf, or take more milk to bind the tannins. Adding more water doesn't fix it; the bitterness is already in solution.

Other signs of over steeping:

- Cup colour is darker than expected
- Bitter rather than just strong
- The aroma has flattened
- Tongue coating sensation that won't wash away
- Even with milk, the cup feels harsh

Adjusting steep time for personal preference

The recommended times provide standard brewing; individual preferences vary:

For lighter cups:

- Reduce steep time by 30 to 60 seconds from standard
- Use slightly less leaf more so than less time if you find lighter cups thin
- Lighter cups extract less caffeine; useful for late afternoon drinking

For stronger cups:

- Use more leaf, not longer time; longer time produces astringency rather than just strength
- For black tea, 1.5x leaf with standard time produces stronger cup without bitterness
- For multi infusion teas, extend later infusions more so than first

Steep times differ by family, and so does water heat, listed in the water temperatures guide and the loose leaf brewing guide.

Equipment that helps

Steeping time precision benefits from simple equipment:

- **Kitchen timer or phone timer:** essential for green tea and other narrow window teas
- **Removable infuser** so you can stop brewing precisely when target time arrives
- **Teapot with internal strainer:** allows pouring without leaf water contact continuing
- **Gongfu set with multiple cups:** for the multiple short infusion approach

For the equipment context see the teapots and infusers guide.

Where to go next

The companion steep times, how to make tea and water temperature guides go further. Source loose-leaf tea from the loose-leaf range, the black tea range, the green tea range, the brand directory, or the full tea shop.

Worth keeping on the shelf around this article: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Wander the tea shop for teas of every steep time, with free UK delivery from £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Longer steeps or shorter, the price per cup is what counts. Loose leaf tends to come out cheaper, though bags occasionally match it.

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