Does tea stain teeth?

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The staining picture:** Tea can stain teeth via tannins, more than coffee in some studies, but it is manageable: milk, rinsing, timing and brushing. The short answer.

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

Yes, tea can stain teeth, more than coffee in many studies, because the tannins in black tea bind firmly to dental enamel and produce visible discolouration over time. The good news: the staining is mostly extrinsic (on the surface), prevented by simple drinking habits, and reversed by basic dental hygiene plus occasional polishing. Switching to lower tannin teas (green, white, herbal) reduces staining substantially. You don't need to give up tea to keep your teeth white; you need to be slightly thoughtful about how you drink it.

This guide covers why tea stains, which teas stain less, and the practical habits and product picks that keep teeth white without giving up the daily cup.

Which teas stain the most

Tea	Staining potential	Reason
Black tea (strong builder's brew)	High	Highest tannin and theaflavin content; dark pigment compounds bind to enamel
Pu erh	High	Dark pigment fermentation by products bind firmly to enamel
Strong matcha	Medium	Higher solid content cup means more pigment; the green pigment shows differently from black
Hibiscus	Medium	Acidic + deeply pigmented; can also temporarily soften enamel before brushing
Oolong	Medium	Partial oxidation produces moderate tannin levels
Green tea (regular brew)	Lower	Lower tannin extract at correct brewing temperature; can actually inhibit some bacteria that drive yellowing
White tea	Lowest	Lightest oxidation, lowest tannin, least pigment
Herbal teas (most)	Variable	Most are gentle; hibiscus and very dark herbals are exceptions

Why tea stains worse than coffee in some studies

A 2014 study compared the staining potential of equivalent volumes of black tea and coffee on extracted human teeth. Tea won the staining contest by a noticeable margin. The reason is the higher tannin content of strong black tea (particularly British style brewed strong tea); coffee has more colour but tea has more tannin pigment binding power per cup.

This is more relevant for British drinkers than for most other cultures because of the volume of tea drunk daily and the strength of the typical British brew.

Habits that prevent or reduce staining

- **Drink with milk:** milk proteins (casein) bind to tannins and reduce their availability to bind to enamel. A milky cup of British tea stains noticeably less than the same cup drunk black.
- **Rinse with water after a strong cup:** a quick swill of plain water after a heavy black tea cup removes the surface film before it sets.
- **Use a straw for iced tea:** straws bypass the front teeth entirely. Almost zero staining contact.
- **Don't brush immediately after acidic teas:** hibiscus, lemon heavy blends, and other acidic herbals temporarily soften enamel; brushing within 30 minutes can wear it. Wait an hour, or rinse with water and brush later.
- **Drink water alongside:** regular sips of water keep saliva flow up; saliva is the body's natural enamel protection mechanism.
- **Don't sip continuously across the day:** sipping a cup over 90 minutes gives more cumulative pigment contact time than drinking the same cup in 10 minutes. The continuous sip habit is the worst staining pattern.

Maintaining whiteness with daily tea drinking

- **Twice daily brushing** with a fluoride toothpaste handles 90% of stain prevention.
- **Whitening toothpaste** (mild abrasives, peroxide, or polyphosphates) handles surface staining at home; the effect is gradual but real.
- **Six monthly hygienist appointments:** remove the build up that brushing can't reach, including the cumulative tannin film along the gum line.
- **Whitening strips and gels** are effective for moderate staining; they bleach the enamel layer slightly. Use according to instructions; over use causes sensitivity.
- **Professional in chair whitening** (around £300 to £700 in the UK) handles years of accumulated staining in a single session. Effects last 1 to 3 years depending on diet.

If you want to keep tea but reduce staining

- **Switch your afternoon and evening cups to herbal or white tea:** the morning builder's brew is the worst staining cup; the rest can be lighter.

- **Drink your tea milkier:** the milk tannin binding is one of the most effective staining reducers available.
- **Drop sugar in tea:** sugar in a tea cup is the unholy combination of staining + dental decay risk. Sweeten with stevia if you must.
- **Try cold brew green or white:** cold brewed teas are lower in tannin extraction and noticeably less staining.

What we stock for low stain daily drinking

Browse the white teas collection, the green teas collection, and the herbal teas collection for the lower staining range.

For white tea, the lowest staining option

- Teapigs White Tea 15 Bags, premium pai mu tan; the gentlest cup on the catalogue
- Twinings White Tea with Grapefruit 15 Bags, light, fresh, low stain

For green tea at correct brewing temperature

- Teapigs Mao Feng Green 15 Bags, premium whole leaf, lower tannin extraction
- Clipper Pure Green 80 Bags, value tier daily green

For herbal cups that don't stain

- Teapigs Peppermint Leaves 15 Bags, no staining concerns
- Dragonfly Rooibos 40 Bags, low pigment, low tannin
- Teapigs Chamomile Flowers 50 Bags, very gentle, won't stain

For black tea drinkers who want a lower tannin option

- Twinings Earl Grey, a less tannic black tea base than builders' brew
- Twinings Darjeeling Tea (International Blend), 25 Tea Bags 50g, lighter Indian black; lower stain than Assam heavy blends

Clear caveats

- **Most tea staining is reversible.** Surface staining responds to brushing, hygienist visits, and whitening toothpastes. Don't panic about discolouration; address it.
- **Intrinsic staining** (deep within the enamel) is harder to remove and usually has other causes (medications during tooth development, antibiotics, fluorosis). Tea contributes to extrinsic surface staining, not intrinsic discolouration.
- **Tea is also good for teeth in some ways.** Green tea contains catechins that inhibit oral bacteria; daily green tea has been associated with lower cavity rates in trials. The staining and decay risk pictures are different.

- **Sugar is the bigger dental enemy than tea pigment.** Sweetened tea, sweetened iced tea, and bubble tea are far worse for dental health than plain strong black tea.
- **Drinking tea while wearing braces:** the wires and brackets can trap tannin pigment more aggressively than natural enamel. Stricter rinsing/brushing routines apply.

Related reading: the white tea overview, the green tea overview, the milk first vs tea first guide, the cold brew tea guide, and the loose vs tea bags guide.

The practical anti-stain routine, in priority order

The conclusion, without alarm, is that tea does stain teeth, the mechanism is real tannin-and-chromogen deposition rather than an internet myth, but the staining is slow, surface-level for most people, and almost entirely manageable with a handful of unglamorous habits. It is worth ordering those habits by how much they actually move the needle, because most advice piles them all together as if they mattered equally, and they do not. The single biggest lever is simply not letting strong tea sit on the teeth: drinking it in a reasonable sitting rather than nursing one mug for two hours, and following it with a mouthful of plain water, removes far more of the staining potential than any whitening product does. The second lever is milk, which does bind some of the tannins and measurably reduces the staining load of a builder strength black brew, which is one practical reason a standard British milky cup stains less aggressively than the same tea drunk black and stewed. The third is timing relative to brushing: brushing immediately after an acidic or very strong cup can move softened surface material around rather than remove it, so the better routine is a water rinse straight after, then brushing later, not instantly. Whitening toothpaste and a hygienist visit sit at the bottom of the list, not because they do nothing, but because they are correcting accumulated stain rather than preventing it, and prevention is cheaper and duller than correction.

Which teas stain hardest, and the milkless trap

Staining tracks tannin and chromogen load, not caffeine, which is why the league table is predictable once you read the leaf rather than the label. Strong, stewed, CTC black tea, the deep mahogany builder's mug left to brew far too long, is the hardest stainer, and ironically the people most worried about staining often drink exactly that, strong and black, in the belief that black tea is the "purer" choice. It is the worst case, not the safest one. Well-made green and white teas are far gentler on enamel because they are brewed shorter and cooler and carry a lighter chromogen load, and a delicate oolong sits between the two. Herbal and rooibos infusions with no true tea leaf at all are the lowest staining warm drinks of the lot, which is a handy fact for anyone who drinks a lot of cups and cares about brightness: alternating a milkless strong black habit with lighter teas and caffeine free infusions spreads the staining load rather than concentrating it. None of this is a reason to stop drinking tea: the real mechanism credited, the proportion kept, and the practical levers named rather than a vague scare. Explore lighter options across the green tea family, herbal tea and caffeine-free guides, or read why milk changes the cup in the black tea family pillar.

Source

- NHS: Fluoride

Teas in the same conversation: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. The full tea shop carries the rest, and once a basket passes £35 the UK delivery is free.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · A handful of reliable teas serves you better than a shelf of experiments. Alternate between two or three teas you enjoy.

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