Decaf English Breakfast

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Decaf English Breakfast, in summary:** Decaf English Breakfast: modern CO2 decaffeination now tastes close to the caffeinated cup. The brands worth buying and the dated ones to avoid.

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

Decaf English Breakfast Tea is the unsung hero of the UK tea shelf, the cup that lets you drink five mugs of breakfast tea without disrupting sleep, lets pregnant drinkers enjoy proper tea without exceeding the NHS caffeine limit, and tastes nearly indistinguishable from caffeinated EB once you brew it properly. Modern CO2-process decaffeination is dramatically better than the old methylene chloride process. This is the working guide.

What "decaf" actually means

Decaffeinated tea has had 95-99% of its caffeine removed by an industrial process applied to the dried leaves before packaging. The remaining caffeine is typically 2-5mg per cup, compared to 40-50mg in caffeinated English Breakfast.

Decaf is NOT caffeine free. The 2-5mg residual is small enough that most caffeine sensitive drinkers don't notice it, but it's not zero. For full caffeine free, you need herbal infusions (rooibos, chamomile, peppermint).

How tea is decaffeinated

CO2 process (the modern method)

Tea leaves are placed in a sealed chamber. Pressurised liquid CO2 is passed through. CO2 selectively binds to caffeine and carries it out of the leaves. The CO2 is recycled. No solvents, no chemicals, the process is essentially "supercritical fluid extraction" using carbon dioxide as the solvent.

Brands using CO2: Yorkshire Tea Decaf, Twinings Decaf, most premium decaf brands. The cup tastes dramatically closer to caffeinated than older methods.

Water process (sometimes called Swiss Water)

Tea leaves are soaked in water. The water is passed through carbon filters that capture caffeine but let flavour compounds through. The "decaf flavoured" water is then re applied to fresh leaves. Multi stage

process. No chemicals; high quality result.

Methylene chloride process (older method)

Tea leaves are soaked in methylene chloride solvent. Caffeine dissolves into the solvent; solvent is removed by evaporation. The process is effective but flavour stripping. Most major UK brands have moved away from this. Some commodity decaf still uses it, check the box if you want to avoid.

Ethyl acetate process

Sometimes called "natural decaffeination" because ethyl acetate occurs naturally in some fruits. Tea soaked in ethyl acetate solvent; solvent removed. Less common in UK; more common in coffee decaffeination.

How tea is decaffeinated, at a glance

Method	What it is	Cup impact
CO2 process	pressurised carbon dioxide strips caffeine; the modern method	best flavour retention; tastes close to caffeinated
Water (Swiss Water)	caffeine removed via water and filters, no solvent	good, gentle; solvent free reassurance
Methylene chloride	older solvent method	more flavour loss; the cup people "remember" as washed out
Ethyl acetate	solvent ("naturally derived") method	moderate; can leave a faint note

The major UK Decaf English Breakfast brands

Yorkshire Tea Decaf

The most popular UK decaf breakfast tea. CO2 decaffeinated. Cup tastes very close to caffeinated Yorkshire, same Assam led malty character, slightly less robustness. Box of 80 bags ~£3-4. Quick Buy: Yorkshire Tea Decaf 80s.

Tetley Decaf

Tetley's decaf is slightly lighter than caffeinated Tetley (already lighter than Yorkshire). Reasonable everyday cup. CO2 process. Mainstream supermarket option.

Twinings English Breakfast Decaf

CO2 process. Slightly more refined than Yorkshire or Tetley decaf, drinks closer to a Ceylon Assam blend than a pure Assam. Premium pricing.

PG Tips Decaf

CO2 process. Closer in cup to caffeinated PG Tips. Mainstream option.

Specialist decaf English Breakfast

- **Whittard English Breakfast Decaf.** Premium UK brand, well balanced.

- **Clipper Decaf English Breakfast.** Fairtrade, organic, plastic free bags.

How to brew decaf for maximum flavour

Most people under brew decaf because they're treating it like instant coffee: pour, dunk, drink. Decaf benefits from a slightly longer steep than caffeinated.

1. 1 bag per 200ml mug.
2. Water at full rolling boil.
3. Steep 4-5 minutes (slightly longer than the 3-4 you'd give caffeinated). The decaffeination process slightly extends extraction time.
4. Add milk and sugar to taste. Decaf takes milk and sugar identically to caffeinated EB.

Pregnancy and decaf

NHS recommends pregnant women limit caffeine to 200mg per day. Decaf English Breakfast at 2-5mg per cup means even 10 cups remains comfortably under the threshold. If you are pregnant, the NHS advises keeping total caffeine under 200mg a day; this decaf still has a little, so include it, and ask your midwife if unsure.

More on tea and pregnancy.

What you lose vs caffeinated

Decaffeination removes:

- **95-99% of caffeine.** The intended effect.
- **Some polyphenols (5-15%).** Especially with older methylene chloride process; CO2 is gentler.
- **Slight aromatic complexity.** A trained palate can taste the difference; most casual drinkers can't.
- **Some L theanine.** Small reduction.

What you keep:

- **Most polyphenols.** These compounds largely survive decaffeination.
- **The flavour structure.** Especially with CO2 process. Cup is recognisably the same tea.
- **The ritual.** A proper brew, milk, sugar, biscuit, the everyday tea experience is preserved.

When to drink decaf English Breakfast

- **Evenings.** 4pm onwards if caffeine affects your sleep.
- **Multiple cups per day.** 8-10 cups daily of caffeinated would push 400-500mg caffeine, too much for most adults. Switch to decaf for the bulk.
- **Pregnancy.** Decaf still counts: in pregnancy the NHS guidance is at most 200mg of caffeine daily from everything combined. Ask your midwife if unsure.
- **Caffeine sensitive drinkers.** Migraine sufferers, anxiety prone, evening drinkers.

- **Children.** Caffeine is generally not recommended for children. Decaf keeps the social side of a cuppa without the stimulant.

Caffeine summary

Tea	Caffeine per 200ml
Yorkshire Tea Original	50mg
Yorkshire Tea Decaf	2-3mg
Tetley Original	40-45mg
Tetley Decaf	2-3mg
PG Tips	45-50mg
PG Tips Decaf	2-3mg
Twinings English Breakfast	40-50mg
Twinings English Breakfast Decaf	2-3mg

FAQ

Is decaf English Breakfast safe in pregnancy? Decaf still counts: in pregnancy the NHS guidance is at most 200mg of caffeine daily from everything combined. Ask your midwife if unsure.

Does decaf have less flavour? Modern CO2-decaffeinated tea tastes very close to caffeinated. The difference is real but subtle for most drinkers.

Best decaf English Breakfast UK? Yorkshire Tea Decaf for closeness to caffeinated. Twinings Decaf for refinement. Clipper for organic plastic free.

Is decaf the same as caffeine free? No, decaf retains 2-5mg per cup. Caffeine free is 0mg (rooibos, chamomile, peppermint).

How is the caffeine removed? Modern brands use CO2 (carbon dioxide) extraction. No solvents, no chemicals, just pressurised CO2 as a selective solvent.

Curator's note: decaf English Breakfast is one of the most underrated teas there is. If you are pregnant, the NHS advises keeping total caffeine under 200mg a day; this decaf still has a little, so include it, and ask your midwife if unsure. Yorkshire Tea Decaf is what we drink at home after 4pm. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Reference noted

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

Buy a CO2 or water-process decaf in the decaf range, an English Breakfast, or browse the full tea shop (free UK postage over £35).

FROM THE CURATOR

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