Does Tea Expire

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Does tea expire, in summary:** Dry tea does not expire in the spoilage sense; it fades. Best before is a quality date, not a safety one. When old tea is fine and when it is not.

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

Tea doesn't really "expire" the way milk does, it doesn't go off, it doesn't become unsafe to drink, it doesn't grow harmful bacteria when stored properly. What it does is go stale: aromatic compounds fade, flavour flattens, the cup loses its character. The "best before" date on a tea box is about peak quality, not safety. Practical shelf life depends on tea type, packaging, and storage. This is the working guide.

The answer

Tea stored in a sealed package in a cool dark place will:

- **1-12 months from manufacture:** Peak flavour. Drink during this window for best results.
- **1-3 years:** Flavour fading but still drinkable. The cup is duller; aromatic top notes are gone; basic structure remains.
- **3-5 years:** Significantly faded. Drinkable in an emergency; not enjoyable. Unless it's pu erh, which improves with age.
- **5+ years:** Mostly stale. Drinkable but barely tea flavoured.
- **Mouldy / wet:** THIS IS THE ONLY ACTUAL SAFETY CONCERN. Mould on tea is harmful and means the storage was compromised. Discard.

Shelf life by tea type

Black tea (Yorkshire, English Breakfast, Earl Grey)

Best within 1-2 years of packaging. Tolerates ageing reasonably, 3-year old black tea is still drinkable, just slightly muted. The fully oxidised leaves are stable.

Green tea

Best within 6-12 months. Fades faster than black tea because the catechins and aromatic compounds are more delicate. 18-month old green tea is noticeably duller.

White tea

Best within 12-18 months. Some white teas (especially aged white teas) deliberately improve over years if stored properly.

Oolong

Best within 1-2 years for green oolongs; longer for darker roasted oolongs. Roasted oolongs can age positively for 3-5+ years.

Pu erh

Improves with age, like wine. Sheng pu erh especially can age for decades, with vintage pu erh from the 1980s-90s commanding premium prices.

Matcha

Most fragile. Best within 4-6 weeks of opening (peak vivid green colour and umami). Unopened matcha lasts 12 months from manufacture in a sealed tin.

Flavoured teas (Earl Grey, fruit teas)

The flavouring fades faster than the base tea. Best within 6-12 months. Earl Grey 2 years old still tastes like black tea but the bergamot character is much weaker.

Herbal infusions (chamomile, peppermint, rooibos)

Best within 12-18 months. Aromatic compounds fade gradually. Older herbal teas are weaker but drinkable.

What "expired" tea looks like

- **Faded colour.** Black tea goes from rich brown to dusty brown. Green tea goes from vivid green to olive yellow. Matcha goes from neon green to dull green.
- **Reduced aroma.** The biggest indicator. Smell the dry leaves, if they smell of nothing, the tea is stale.
- **Flat brewed cup.** Lacking complexity, finish, top notes.
- **NO OFF SMELLS.** Stale tea smells of nothing; it shouldn't smell musty, rancid, or "off." If it does, that's mould or contamination, discard.

What kills tea fastest

1. **Air.** Oxidation degrades aromatic compounds. Re sealing matters.
2. **Light.** UV breaks down catechins. Clear glass jars on sunny shelves are the worst storage.
3. **Heat.** Accelerates degradation. Don't store tea above the kettle or near the oven.
4. **Moisture.** Promotes mould and accelerates oxidation. Steamy kitchens (over the kettle) are bad. Humid storage is bad.
5. **Strong odours.** Tea absorbs surrounding aromas. Don't store next to coffee, spices, or strong cheese.

How to store tea properly

- **Airtight container.** Original packaging if it re seals; otherwise transfer to a tin with a tight lid.
- **Cool, dark cupboard.** Not above the kettle, oven, or radiator.
- **Away from strong smelling foods.** Tea absorbs aromas, don't store next to coffee or spices.
- **NOT in the fridge or freezer.** Counterintuitive, but condensation is the enemy. Tea taken in and out of the fridge gathers moisture and degrades faster. Exception: unopened sealed matcha tin can be refrigerated for very long term storage; once opened, keep at room temperature.
- **Original packaging is usually fine.** If the box and inner foil seal still work, no need to transfer.

"Best before" vs "use by" dates

- **"Best before" date.** Quality indicator. Tea after this date is safe to drink, just past peak. Most UK tea is dated 18-24 months from packing.
- **"Use by" date.** Safety indicator. Tea doesn't normally have a "use by" date because it's a dry, shelf stable product. If you see one, it's likely on a flavoured with fresh component product.

Old tea past its "best before" is not unsafe. It's just less interesting to drink.

Tea you SHOULD throw out

- **Mouldy tea.** Visible mould (white, green, or black fluff) means storage was compromised. Discard. Don't try to brush it off.
- **Wet or damp tea.** Moisture compromises everything. Discard.
- **Tea that smells off.** Musty, rancid, sour, fermented (when it shouldn't be), if the smell is wrong, the tea is wrong.
- **Tea stored next to chemicals.** If it's been in the same cupboard as strong cleaning products and absorbed the smell, it's not enjoyable to drink.
- **Tea bags from a long flooded cupboard.** Even after drying, they may have absorbed contamination.

The pu erh exception

Pu erh is the one tea that gets better with age. Sheng (raw) pu erh, properly stored in a humid environment with airflow, develops complexity over decades. Vintage pu erh from established producers can sell for thousands of pounds per cake. Old age is a feature, not a bug, for pu erh.

Reviving slightly old tea

If you've found a forgotten box that's slightly faded but not stale:

- **Use a stronger leaf to water ratio.** Compensate for reduced aromatic intensity.
- **Brew slightly longer.** Extracts what's left.
- **Cold brew.** Cold brewing extracts what hot brewing might miss in tired leaves.

- **Use in cooking.** Old Earl Grey makes shortbread; old chai makes rice pudding. More on cooking with tea here.

FAQ

Does tea expire? Not really, it goes stale, not bad. Dry tea stored properly remains safe for years; flavour fades over time.

Can I drink tea past its best before date? Yes, "best before" is a quality date, not safety. The cup will be slightly weaker.

How long does an opened box of tea last? Black tea: 1-2 years opened. Green tea: 6-12 months. Matcha: 4-6 weeks.

Can old tea make you sick? No, unless it's mouldy or contaminated. Stale tea is just unpleasant, not unsafe.

How should I store tea? Airtight container, cool dark cupboard, away from strong odours and moisture.

Curator's note: I have a friend who once panicked about a 4-year old box of Yorkshire Tea at the back of her cupboard. The tea was fine, slightly faded, but absolutely drinkable. The British tea bag industry would have a problem if its product really expired within months. Drink the old box, just brew it slightly stronger. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Shelf life at a glance

Tea type	Sealed, cool, dark	Opened, well stored	What fades first
Black (whole leaf or bags)	2 to 3 years at good quality	12 to 18 months	Briskness and aroma; the cup goes flat before it goes bad
Green and white	12 to 18 months	6 to 12 months	Fresh, grassy top notes; oxidises to a duller, hay-like cup
Oolong	2 to 3 years (roasted keeps longest)	12 to 24 months	Florals fade first; roasted styles are far more forgiving
Herbal and rooibos	2 to 3 years	12 to 24 months	Essential-oil aroma in mint and citrus blends; the cup weakens
Pu-erh and aged dark tea	Improves for years	Indefinite if kept dry	Nothing: this is the one exception, made to improve with age

If a tired caddy has gone flat, the fix is fresh leaf: browse the black tea range, the green tea range, or the full tea shop (free UK shipping over £35).

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Pick the easiest step from this page and use up the oldest box first. Stocking up and

storage upgrades can wait until week two.

Storage and shelf life reading

- Does tea go off?
- How to store tea
- black tea reference
- Herbal tea overview

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

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