How Long to Steep Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Steeping times by type, in summary:** Steeping times: black 3-5 min, green 90s-3 min, white 3-5, oolong 3-5 or 30s gongfu, pu-erh 4-6 or 20s, herbals 5-10. The full per-type cheat sheet.

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

Most British tea drinkers underbrew or overbrew their tea by treating every type the same way. Different teas need different times. This is the working guide, every major tea type, with the time and temperature that produces the proper cup.

The master steeping table

Tea type	Temperature	Steep time
White tea	80-85°C	4-5 minutes
Green tea (Japanese sencha)	75-80°C	2-3 minutes
Green tea (Chinese pan fired)	80-85°C	2-3 minutes
Yellow tea	80-85°C	3-4 minutes
Light oolong	85-90°C	3-4 minutes
Dark oolong / roasted oolong	90-95°C	4-5 minutes
Black tea (Western brewing)	95-100°C (full boil)	3-5 minutes
Black tea (Darjeeling specifically)	90-95°C	2-3 minutes
Pu erh	95-100°C	3-5 minutes
Earl Grey	95-100°C	3-3½ minutes (don't go past 4)
Chai (bagged in milk)	95°C+ (simmer)	3-4 minutes
Matcha	70-80°C	Whisked, not steeped (15-30 sec)
Rooibos	95-100°C	5-7 minutes
Honeybush	95-100°C	5-7 minutes
Chamomile	95-100°C	5-7 minutes (cover the cup)
Peppermint	95-100°C	5-7 minutes

Ginger tea	95-100°C	7-10 minutes
Fruit infusion	95-100°C	5-7 minutes
Hibiscus	95-100°C	5-7 minutes

The two key principles

Principle 1: Lower temperature for delicate teas

Green and white teas have delicate aromatic compounds that boiling water bitters. The catechins also extract more bitter compounds at higher temperatures.

- Green tea at 75-80°C: balanced cup with vegetal sweet character.
- Green tea at 95°C+: bitter, harsh, tannic.

Principle 2: Don't overbrew

Most teas extract their pleasant flavour compounds in the first 2-4 minutes. Past that, you're mostly extracting bitter tannins.

How to lower water temperature

For green and white tea, you need water below boiling. Three methods:

- **Variable temperature kettle.** Set to 80°C or 75°C. Most precise.
- **Boil and wait.** Pour boiled water into the teapot or pour from one vessel to another (cools 5-10°C in transit). Wait 1-2 minutes for further cooling.
- **Add a splash of cold water.** Pour 90% boiling water + 10% cold water for ~85°C.

Specific tea steeping notes

Green tea (sencha), 75°C, 2 minutes

Most British drinkers brew green tea for too long at too hot water. Brewed properly, sencha is sweet, vegetal, and refreshingly bitter free. Brewed wrong, it's harsh and grassy.

Earl Grey, 3-3½ minutes

The bergamot oil becomes acrid past 4 minutes. Don't oversteep. More on Earl Grey.

Yorkshire Tea / English Breakfast, 4-5 minutes

Stronger black tea blends benefit from longer extraction. Hard water drinkers may need 5+ minutes to compensate.

Darjeeling, 2-3 minutes only

Darjeeling over extracts past 3 minutes, the muscatel character gives way to bitterness. Don't treat it like Yorkshire Tea. More on Darjeeling.

Chamomile, 5-7 minutes COVERED

The volatile aromatics and apigenin escape as steam. Cover the cup or pot. More on chamomile.

Ginger tea, 7-10 minutes

Especially fresh ginger root needs longer to extract gingerols. Don't underbrew.

Rooibos, 5-7 minutes minimum

Rooibos is hard to over extract. Tolerates 10-15 minutes if forgotten without becoming bitter. More on rooibos.

Pu erh, 3-5 minutes (Western); short multiple infusions in gongfu

Pu erh is durable. Strong tolerated. Multiple infusions reveal different character layers. More on gongfu brewing.

Matcha, not steeped, whisked

Matcha is whole leaf consumption. Sift 1-2g into a chawan, add 70ml of 75°C water, whisk briskly for 15-30 seconds. Drink immediately.

Multiple infusions (gongfu)

For premium loose leaf teas, multiple short infusions reveal different character. Standard gongfu approach: 5g leaves per 100ml pot, infusions at 15-30 seconds escalating to 60-90 seconds across 4-8 brews. More here.

Cold brewing, different rules entirely

Cold brew uses time instead of temperature. Standard times:

- Black tea: 4-6 hours
- Green tea: 6-8 hours
- White tea: 8-10 hours
- Herbal: 8-12 hours

Detailed cold brew guide.

How to test your steeping time

If your tea tastes:

- **Weak / thin:** Steep longer.
- **Bitter / harsh:** Steep shorter, or use lower temperature water.
- **Astringent (mouth puckering):** Tannins over extracted; shorter steep.
- **Flat / boring:** Tea is stale, or ratio is too low (use more leaves).

FAQ

How long should I steep tea? Depends on type. Black tea: 3-5 minutes. Green tea: 2-3 minutes (lower temperature). Herbal: 5-7 minutes (or longer).

Why does my green tea taste bitter? Almost always: water too hot (use 75-80°C) or steeped too long (max 3 minutes).

Can I steep tea longer than recommended? Yes, but the cup gets bitter past optimal time. Some teas (rooibos, herbal) are forgiving; others (Earl Grey, Darjeeling, green) aren't.

Should I cover the tea while steeping? Yes for herbal teas (volatile aromatics escape). Optional for black and green tea.

Is overbrewed tea bad for you? Not bad for you, just unpleasant. Higher tannin extraction can affect iron absorption if heavy daily intake.

Curator's note: most British tea drinkers brew the same way for everything: bag in mug, hot water, four minutes. That works for Yorkshire Tea; it ruins everything else. Two minutes shorter and 15-20°C cooler transforms green tea entirely. Worth experimenting with. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

A timer and a variable-temperature kettle are the only kit that matters here. Browse the full tea shop.

Related on the wiki: Tea Steeping Time.

Reference noted

- PubMed: Tannins and non-haem iron absorption

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Pick what you'll actually drink every day. The steep you manage every day counts for more than the ideal one you never get round to.

Brewing time reading

For brewing technique see the how to brew black tea guide, the how to brew green tea piece, the how to brew white tea overview, the how to brew oolong guide, and the how to brew pu-erh piece. For equipment see the temperature kettle and teapots and infusers guides.

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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