Is Decaf Tea Good?

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Is decaf tea good, in summary:** Yes, modern decaf is good, with two caveats: it is reduced rather than caffeine free, and the method decides flavour. CO2 decaf keeps far more character.

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

Is decaf tea any good? Modern CO2-decaffeinated tea is dramatically better than the older methylene chloride decaf that gave the category a bad reputation. Modern Yorkshire Tea Decaf, Twinings Decaf English Breakfast, and similar brands taste very close to caffeinated, close enough that most casual drinkers can't distinguish.

The answer

Decaf tea quality has improved enormously in the last 20 years. The CO2 (supercritical fluid extraction) process removes 95-99% of caffeine while preserving 85-95% of polyphenols and most aromatic compounds. The cup is recognisably the same tea, slightly muted, but not the disappointment that older methylene chloride decaf was.

Why decaf has a bad reputation

Three legacy reasons:

1. Older decaffeination methods were poor

Methylene chloride process (used widely until the 1990s-2000s) stripped 25-35% of polyphenols and significantly reduced aromatic compounds. The cup was noticeably weaker, flatter, and less interesting than caffeinated.

2. Cheap modern decaf still uses worse methods

Some commodity decaf still uses methylene chloride or ethyl acetate solvents. These produce the "decaf is bad" experience that confirms the bad reputation.

3. Memory drift

People who tried decaf 20 years ago and didn't like it haven't tried modern CO2 decaf and have memory of the older version.

Modern CO2 decaf is genuinely good

The CO2 process:

1. Tea leaves placed in pressurised chamber.
2. Liquid CO2 pumped in (75 bar pressure, 30-40°C).
3. CO2 selectively binds caffeine.
4. CO2 + caffeine removed; CO2 recycled.

No solvents, no chemicals. The remaining tea has:

- 2-5mg residual caffeine per cup (down from 40-50mg)
- 85-95% of original polyphenols
- 80-90% of original L theanine
- Slightly muted aromatic compared to caffeinated

The brands that do CO2 decaf well

- **Yorkshire Tea Decaf.** CO2 process. Closest decaf to caffeinated Yorkshire. The closest to "you can't tell the difference."
- **Twinings English Breakfast Decaf.** CO2 process. Premium positioning.
- **Twinings Earl Grey Decaf.** Bergamot survives decaffeination beautifully. Excellent.
- **PG Tips Decaf.** CO2 process. Mainstream alternative.
- **Tetley Decaf.** Lighter cup, mid range.
- **Clipper Decaf.** Fairtrade, organic, plastic free.
- **Pukka Decaf range.** Organic; sometimes blended with herbs.

What decaf does well

- **Evening tea drinking.** 2-5mg won't disrupt sleep.
- **Pregnancy.** Comfortably within NHS 200mg/day limit.
- **Caffeine sensitivity.** Migraines, reflux, jitters: decaf keeps the habit without the trigger.
- **Children.** The tea habit without a stimulant.
- **Multiple cups daily.** 8 cups daily of decaf = ~24mg total caffeine. Sustainable.

What decaf doesn't do well

- **Capture the full aromatic complexity.** Premium loose leaf decaf still loses some character vs caffeinated.

- **Specialty teas.** Decaf white tea, decaf delicate green tea, the decaffeination process strips more from delicate teas. Not all categories survive well.
- **The "kick" of caffeinated tea.** If you want a lift from your tea, decaf provides only the L theanine + minor caffeine.

Decaf vs caffeine free

Term	Meaning	Caffeine
Caffeinated tea	Real tea, full caffeine	30-50mg/cup
Decaf tea	Real tea, caffeine industrially removed	2-5mg/cup
Caffeine free tea	Herbal infusion (not real tea)	0mg/cup

If you want absolute zero caffeine: drink rooibos, chamomile, or other herbal infusions. Decaf still has trace amounts.

How to brew decaf well

Decaf benefits from slightly longer brewing than caffeinated to compensate for the lighter character:

- 1 bag per 200ml
- Full rolling boil
- 4-5 minutes (slightly longer than 3-4 for caffeinated)
- Milk and sugar as desired (decaf takes both fine)

The healthy decaf perspective

If you're drinking decaf for the polyphenol and L theanine benefits without caffeine consequences:

- You're keeping 80 to 95% of the polyphenol content
- You're getting 80-90% of the L theanine
- You're skipping the caffeine load
- Net benefit: substantial portion of tea's health profile preserved

Don't pass over decaf: modern CO2 decaf keeps most of the character of caffeinated tea.

FAQ

Is decaf tea any good? Yes, modern CO2-decaffeinated tea is dramatically better than the methylene chloride decaf of 20 years ago. Casual drinkers often can't distinguish from caffeinated.

Does decaf tea have caffeine? Yes, 2-5mg per cup. Practically negligible but not zero.

Best decaf tea UK? Yorkshire Tea Decaf for everyday EB; Twinings Earl Grey Decaf for refined classic; Pukka or Clipper for organic.

Pregnancy safe? Decaf still holds a little caffeine, so in pregnancy it counts towards the NHS limit of 200mg a day from all sources. Ask your midwife if unsure.

Will decaf affect my traditional uses? 80-95% of polyphenols preserved. Most of the cardiovascular and cognitive benefits remain.

Curator's note: if you haven't tried modern CO2 decaf, you'd be surprised. Yorkshire Tea Decaf is the cup I drink after 4pm and the cup I'd serve a guest in the evening without apology. The old "decaf is bad" framing belongs to a different era of decaffeination. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Pull in from the decaffeinated range.

Reference noted

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

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Match the tea to the moment. Put regular tea in the 6am cup and decaf in the 4pm one; they need not match.

Decaf reading

- How is caffeine removed from tea
- Decaf vs caffeine-free
- Caffeine in tea
- Caffeine-free tea

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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