

# The Right Cup of Tea

Learn how to maximize tea's health benefits

**A**s the weather grows cooler, sipping tea takes the chill off and also gives your health a boost. Several compounds in tea offer benefits ranging from cancer prevention to weight control, says Iman Hakim, MD, PhD, MPH, dean of the University of Arizona's College of Public Health. Standouts include antioxidant polyphenols called catechins (the best known is epigallocatechin gallate, or EGCG, in green and white teas), and the amino acid L-theanine, which may enhance immunity and also moderate the stimulating effects of caffeine in tea.

Green, black, oolong, and white teas all come from the *Camellia sinensis* plant, but differ in how they're produced. White tea, the least processed, has a delicate flavor and is made by lightly steaming and drying the youngest tea leaves and buds. Black tea, the most processed, has the strongest flavor and undergoes the most oxidation during production. Green and oolong teas fall between the other two in terms of taste and color. Although white tea has the highest levels of antioxidants, green tea is better researched. Dr. Hakim advises drinking all four varieties to get the full range of tea's beneficial effects. Here are several ways that tea does a body good:

**Cancer** Some studies link regular consumption of tea (especially green tea) to a lower risk of breast cancer, advanced prostate cancer, and other cancers. Catechins help prevent rapid cell multiplication, speed the death of cancer cells, and also promote enzymes that detoxify carcinogens and reduce inflammation associated with cancer and other diseases.

**Brain health** Epidemiological studies suggest that drinking green tea helps protect against cognitive impairment in older people. In lab and animal studies, catechins show promise for defending against Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease.



**Heart disease** Drinking tea can reduce cardiovascular risk factors including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, inflammation, and hardening of the arteries. In addition, tea's antioxidants assist in regulating insulin, helping prevent heart disease and complications of diabetes.

**Obesity** Results in people are mixed, but animal studies suggest green and oolong teas may aid weight management. Caffeinated tea might boost metabolism, and EGCG may encourage the body to burn more calories from fat.

## PRACTICAL TIPS

Studies suggest drinking at least three cups a day to reap tea's health benefits. Pour very hot, not boiling, water over the tea and steep for two to three minutes. Hot, brewed tea is best, says Dr. Hakim. Adding ice dilutes the tea, and as tea cools the polyphenols and caffeine may bond together and sink to the cup's bottom, where you're less likely to consume them. Instant tea has very low amounts of polyphenols, so she doesn't recommend it. If you prefer decaffeinated tea, look for varieties that use carbon dioxide and water to decaffeinate the leaves rather than a solvent such as ethyl acetate, which lowers the catechin content. I also advise not putting milk in your tea, as research suggests that it interferes with polyphenol absorption.

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