

A Nice Cuppa Tea

What a lovely way to start the day! Tea is the second most commonly consumed beverage in the world after water and it is estimated that Canadians get 30% of their caffeine from tea.¹ That is a lot of tea!



TYPES OF TEAS

BREWED TEAS

The tea we most often drink is produced by steeping the young leaves and leaf buds of the tea plant in freshly boiled water. All teas are made from the same species of plant (*Camellia sinensis*) and although there are approximately 1,500 different varieties, the four most commonly known are black, green, oolong and white.

Tea has been popular in the United Kingdom for over 350 years; however, the story of tea begins in China. According to legend, in 2737 BC, the Chinese emperor Shen Nung was sitting beneath a tree while his servant boiled drinking water nearby and some leaves from the tree blew into the water. The emperor decided to try the infusion that was accidentally created and the resulting drink was tea.

HERBAL TEAS

Herbal teas can be a healthy drink choice if you stick with the well-known varieties like mint, chamomile, and fruit-flavoured infusions. These teas are basically plant parts steeped in water to give you a sugar-free and caffeine-free flavoured water drink. You can enjoy these types of herbal teas hot or cold, or even mixed with a small amount of 100% fruit juice, sparkling water or club soda. Some herbs may not be well tested on children or adults and may contain harmful ingredients. Check with HealthLink BC by calling 8-1-1 to speak with a dietitian to make sure they are safe to drink.

BUBBLE TEA

Bubble Tea is a new drink that is growing in popularity with intermediate aged kids yet is still not a healthy choice. Bubble Tea is thought to have originated in Taiwan in the early 1980s at a small tea stand where fruit flavoured syrups were added to tea. Different types of green and black tea are used as a base, and then fruit flavoured syrups, milk, condensed milk, or cream are added. Bubble Tea contains tapioca pearls or “bubbles” that sit at the bottom of the cup and are sucked up through a wide straw and require chewing like a gummy bear candy. These ingredients create drinks that contain significant amounts of sugar and caffeine. A popular Bubble Tea order is a medium (500mL) fruit-flavoured tea with tapioca pearls. This combination results in a drink containing approximately 21 sugar cubes and up to 240mg caffeine.



¹ It's Your Health: Caffeine. Health Canada PDF, March 2010 <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/food-aliment/caffeine-eng.php>

ADDITIVES and INGREDIENTS IN TEAS

ANTIOXIDANTS

Tea contains polyphenols, a group of chemical substances found in plants, that research has shown act as antioxidants. Antioxidants are substances or nutrients in foods that can prevent or slow the oxidative damage to our body. When our body cells use oxygen, they naturally produce free radicals (by-products) which can cause damage. Antioxidants act as "free radical scavengers" and help prevent and repair damage done by these free radicals. Brightly coloured fruits and vegetables provide some of the highest naturally occurring antioxidants.

CAFFEINE

One cup of brewed tea contains (on average) 50mg caffeine. A can of iced tea (355 ml) contains about 26mg of caffeine, and a 591mL bottle of iced tea contains about 30-60mg. A large chai tea latte from a popular coffee shop contains 100mg of caffeine, and a medium Bubble Tea contains anywhere from 80-240mg. Green tea often surprises people by containing the same amount of caffeine as a cup of brewed black tea; anywhere from 60-100mg, depending on how long it steeps.

Adding caffeine to a student's body can be a bad idea. Health professionals suggest that intermediate aged students consume no more than 65-85mg of caffeine each day. Caffeine is a mildly addictive substance that can make students feel irritable and restless, and causes difficulty when concentrating. Some students are more sensitive to caffeine and may experience these and other symptoms when they consume even lower levels of caffeine.

SUGAR

Sugar is often added to tea. The recommended limit for added sugar for elementary students aged 9-12 is no more than 13 sugar cubes from all that they eat AND drink each day. A can of regular iced tea (355 ml) may have as many as 10 sugar cubes which is the same amount as a regular can of pop. A 591mL bottle contains about 14 sugar cubes. Many adults know that pop is not a healthy drink choice for children and think that iced tea is a better choice. The fact is that it is still a drink with more sugar than children need, and it provides no healthy ingredients for growing bodies.

OTHER INGREDIENTS

Some tea drinks add ingredients like Ginseng and B-vitamins to make them appear to be a healthy drink choice. The health claims for herbal remedies in these products have less stringent standards of evidence than do health claims for foods. Many of these ingredients have not been well researched with respect to their effects in children (or other higher risk groups such as pregnant women, the elderly, etc.). For example, Panax Ginseng (one variety of ginseng) is considered safe for adults to consume orally for less than 3 months under the supervision of a health care practitioner, but is not recommended for infants and children.²

² Ginseng, Panax, Medline Plus PDF, US National Library of Medicine, reviewed Sept 2010.
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/natural/1000.html>

The bottom line is that many tea drinks load children up with more sugar and caffeine than is healthy for them, yet there are no benefits from tea that are great enough to make up for that. To make the healthy choice the easy choice, choose water, unflavoured milk or soy beverage and 100% fruit and vegetable juices.