



A Better Buzz

It offers a boost but no burn, and can even make you healthier. Are you drinking enough tea?

By Yishane Lee

Before running a morning race, Jeremy Smith doesn't drink coffee, cola, or energy drinks. He reaches instead for a mug of green tea. "A cup about 30 minutes before a race makes me feel good in all the right places without feeling bloated," says Smith, of Corvallis, Oregon, who has finished a dozen marathons.

Lots of runners pick tea for their prerun jolt. The caffeine is a proven performance enhancer that increases endurance, improves alertness, and makes running feel easier. True, tea provides only half as much caffeine as coffee or energy drinks (or 40 to 60 milligrams per cup), but it's also easier to take. The acid in coffee and the carbonation in cola and energy drinks can be hard on jittery prerace stomachs--leading to heartburn and stomach upset.

Tea also has more health benefits than the other caffeinated options. Along with trace vitamins and minerals, tea is rich in a class of disease-fighting antioxidants known as polyphenols, which can help prevent cancer and heart disease. Studies have also credited tea with improving dental health, aiding weight loss, boosting immunity, and increasing bone density. Tufts University nutrition professor Jeffrey Blumberg, Ph.D., estimates that the amount of antioxidants in two cups of tea is equal to the amount in a serving of fruits or vegetables.

Steep Benefits

As the health benefits of tea have become better known, the days of Lipton as your only option are long gone. In fact, the tea aisle at your grocery store can be overwhelming. So can the conflicting news reports about which tea is "healthiest." Black, oolong, green, white, and all those herbals. Where to start?

All teas come from the *Camellia sinensis* plant. Black tea, the main ingredient in popular blends like Earl Grey and Orange Pekoe, is named for its dark, dried leaves, which have been completely oxidized (oxygen reacts with the oils in the leaves). The resulting tea has a strong taste that stands up to milk and sugar. Green teas, on the other hand, are not oxidized. The dried leaves stay green, and the tea's flavor is more delicate than that of black teas (so no milk or sugar is needed). Oolongs are semi-oxidized, falling somewhere between blacks and greens in terms of flavors, while white teas are the least processed of all.

In terms of nutritional value, teas that are the least oxidized (mainly greens and whites) retain more polyphenols than those that are fully oxidized. In particular, green and white teas contain high amounts of the polyphenol epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG), which has potent anti-inflammatory properties and is thought to boost the body's ability to use fat as an energy source. And according to an April 2005 study by researchers at the University of Murcia in Spain and Britain's John Innes Center, EGCG may even inhibit cancerous cell growth.

That said, black teas contain more of the antioxidants theaflavins and thearubigins, which have also been shown to slow cancer cell growth and lower cholesterol. What's more, a 1999 study showed that drinking at least one cup of black tea a day cut the risk of heart attack by 44 percent.

Herbal teas like mint, chamomile, and rooibos don't come from *Camellia sinensis*, so technically aren't true teas. But they have their own place in a runner's cupboard. Many herbals are caffeine-free, making them a good option for runners who want to warm up after a cold run but still be able to fall asleep easily at night.

Researchers have even examined how tea preparation affects its healthful properties. Some studies suggest loose-leaf teas provide more antioxidants than bagged teas, that plain tea has more benefits than tea with milk, and that hot tea is healthier than cold tea. Yet "more" is simply a matter of degree.

"The best tea in the world is the tea you like the best," says Blumberg, "because then you'll drink it often, and the more tea you drink, the better it is for your health."

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