

Outpost Exchange
Health Benefits of Tea
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In our “no pain, no gain” society, it is refreshing to find a health phenomenon that is steeped in pleasure, leisure and comfort: drinking tea.

“I believe that the break involved with drinking tea is one of its magical health benefits,” says Melissa Honkamp, who, with her husband Michael is co-owner of Rochambo Coffee & Tea House at 1317 E. Brady Street in Milwaukee, Wis. Most tea aficionados and health gurus agree that the combination of the ritual relaxation and proven medicinal qualities make tea a powerful health brew.

Tea is the second most consumed beverage in the world (water is the first). About 2.5 million tons of tea leaves are produced annually, according to the University of Texas Center for Alternative Medicine Research in Cancer. Due to the recent explosion of research and the subsequent extensive media coverage of its health benefits, many Americans are jumping on the tea band wagon. From cancer to heart disease, and from PMS to sore throats, tea is being recommended as part of the prevention or cure.

But not all teas are created equal, however, and not all teas *are* teas. Within the tea world, there exist four general categories under which thousands of varieties are classified. These styles include: white, black, green, and oolong tea. Joshua Kaiser, tea connoisseur and founder and import director of Milwaukee’s Rishi Tea, adds a fifth style, pu-erh, which is an aged tea prized for its slimming, detoxifying and cholesterol reducing properties. Like a good scotch, pu-erh’s price reflects the number of years it has been aged.

The leaves of all these varieties come from the same plant, *camellia sinensis*. What sets the teas apart from one another is the processing which immediately follows harvesting. Black tea leaves are fermented to darken the leaves and produce flavor. This process destroys some of the beneficial health constituents that survive in green tea. Green tea is lightly steamed directly after plucking in order to stop the oxidation process. White tea is one of the rarest and finest teas and is produced only in China. It consists exclusively of the youngest, most delicate spring buds which are still covered with fine whitish hairs and picked just before the leaves unfurl. They are immediately enveloped in a light steam to stop the enzymatic breakdown of the leaves. Oolong tea leaves are picked at their exact peak and are wilted in direct sunlight, then shaken in bamboo baskets to accelerate the oxidation process.

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Jacobus

Health Benefits of Tea—Add One

A broad range of quality and taste exists within these tea categories and can be likened to the way different grape varieties create different wines. Environmental and climatic conditions, along with location, soil, water and care all play an important part in the final product, much the way such factors produce either a rare vintage cabernet or a simple table red.

Herbal teas generally are not considered true teas, since they typically do not contain *camellia sinensis*. They are more correctly called herbal infusions or tisanes. They are a warm and soothing way to ingest medicinal herbs and are most often drunk for system-specific relief. For instance, Dr. Edie Beguelin, a wholistic chiropractor and nutrition specialist located at 316 E. Silver Spring Drive in Whitefish Bay, recommends a number of herbal infusions to her clients, including:

- “Throat Coat,” which contains slippery elm for sore throats
- St. John’s Wart tea for depression
- Oat Straw tea for menopausal women, because it builds bones, helps balance blood sugar levels and assists with vaginal dryness
- Black Cahoosh tea or Tong Quai tea for PMS

Gail Van Treek, nutritionist at Natural Health Services located at 1428 N. Farwell Avenue in Milwaukee, recommends, among others, parsley tea for kidney ailments, chamomile to relax the nervous system and ginger tea for stomach and digestion. “I recommend every person drink some type of tea,” Van Treek says. “It is very, very beneficial. You’re getting a lot of healing and/or cleansing properties through teas.” Van Treek also uses it as a means to wean clients off of high caffeine drinks, such as coffee.

Rochambo carries more than 100 types of loose tea and herbal infusions, one of the largest selections in the U.S. All teas on the menu are also available for retail purchase. Some of the herbals recommended by Honkamp include:

- “Deep Breath”—formulated by an herbologist for sore throats, it contains slippery elm, echinacea and elderberry
- “Winter Friend”—for overall cold relief, it contains, ginger, rosehips and boneset as well as echinacea and elderberry
- “Dream”—a sleep-inducing elixir made of Meso-American and European dream-seeking herbs such as sarsaparilla root, valerian root, lemon, lavender and catnip

A recent trip to The Outpost on Capitol Drive revealed shelves of captivating tea titles such as, Crystal Star’s *Beautiful Skin Tea*, *Conceptions Tea* and *Stressed Out Tea*. Ancient Healing Formula offered *Fasting Tea*, *Menopause Tea*, and *Joint Comfort*, while Traditional Medicinals included *PMS Tea* and *Female Tone*.

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Jacobus Health Benefits of Tea—Add Two

When it comes to prevention of major diseases, the recent headline-grabbing research on tea has dealt mostly with green tea, although studies indicate that all camellia sinensis teas, in varying degrees, have been shown to:

- Lower blood pressure
- Lower blood sugar
- Prevent cavities
- Act as a powerful antioxidant
- Aid carbohydrate metabolism
- Kill bacteria and influenza virus
- Fight cancer
- Strengthen blood vessel walls
- Reduce stress
- Reduce weight
- Improve digestion
- Combat osteoporosis
- Increase longevity

The Tea Council, based in London, also points out that black tea contains a number of vitamins and minerals, including Vitamins B1, B2 and B6, Folic Acid, Vitamin C, Vitamins E and K, manganese and potassium, among others.

Dr. Andrew Weil, M.D., in his monthly magazine, *Self Healing*, recommends green tea “as a tonic—a natural substance that tones the healing system and helps if fight off harmful influences.” He notes that “more than 4,000 years after its healing properties were first recognized in China, scientific evidence is growing that tea may help prevent two leading killers: cancer and heart disease.” Experts believe the health benefits of green tea come primarily from its content of polyphenols, natural compounds that act as antioxidants. The polyphenols in green tea appear to be particularly powerful antioxidants. In laboratory studies performed at the University of Kansas and presented in September 1997, a polyphenol called epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG) proved 100 times ore effective at neutralizing free radicals than vitamin C and 25 times more effective than vitamin E. Black tea also contains polyphenols, but at significantly lower levels. Herbal infusions contain none.

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Jacobus Health Benefits of Tea—Add Three

Most tea experts recommend drinkers opt for the loose-leaf variety versus bags, because it produces a higher quality and better tasting tea that retains more of the health enhancing properties due to the uniformity of the leaves. Tea found in bags is the “dust” of the leaves. However, tea in bags is better than no tea at all, according to Rochambo’s Honkamp. “I don’t think it matters how or why people start drinking tea, just that they do it on a regular basis,” she said in a recent interview. “If someone starts drinking tea from a tea bag, that’s great. Drinking tea is a never-ending learning experience and eventually that person will progress to better quality loose leaf teas.”

It is important to note that tea is not a silver bullet for what ails you. Most health professionals who recommend tea suggest it as one of several tools used to combat disease or treat symptoms. Nutritionists Van Treek and Beguelin suggest that tea-seekers should get advice from a reputable source on what tea is appropriate for their ailment. And you’re still going to hear that you have to eat right and exercise to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

It is also a long-term treatment, often taking up to six months to see results. The recommended number of cups of tea a day is three-five, with some recommending as many as seven a day. Although the caffeine level is significantly less than coffee (about half), for those sensitive to caffeine, several cups a day can cause nervousness, dizziness and difficulty sleeping.

Rishi Tea’s Kaiser reminds us that tea needn’t be reduced to yet one more thing we “should” or “have” to do for our health. “You should drink tea to enjoy it, for the experience,” Kaiser said. “The health benefits have been known since the beginning of tea. But it’s still around because of the pleasure of it.” Now *that* approach to health is just my cup of tea!

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