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Deborah Rhoades, M.A., R.D.

Extension Educator, Family & Consumer Sciences

TEA TIME

Teatime....no I am not talking about golf, but the worlds' number one favorite drink, after water. Consumption has soared in recent years as consumers reach for alternatives to soda.

Tea has been around for thousands of years, but there have never been such a variety of teas available as there are today. All tea comes from the *Camellia Sinensis* plant. The differences come from how the tea is processed. Black tea, popular in the US, is exposed to air, which turns the leaves dark and imparts flavor. Green tea is not processed as much, where the leaves are heated or steamed quickly and thus less flavorful. Upon moving here, I soon discovered that Marylanders have a different definition for tea. When at a restaurant or friends house and I asked for tea, I received a tea bag and cup of hot water. For a Southern girl, tea is cold, freshly brewed and sweet, made with lots of sugar! We call it sweet tea in the South and now the whole country has discovered how great it tastes. They sell it by gallons in the supermarket, in cans at the convenience store, and even fast food restaurants have it on the menu.

I prefer to make my own tea. For the cost of one gallon of ready to drink tea, you can buy an entire box of tea bags that makes 12 gallons. Moreover, home brewed has 75% more potassium (88mg) and you get to decide how much sweetener to add if any. For instance, two teaspoons of sugar will sweeten one cup of tea for only 30 calories. One cup of a popular tea sold in the can has 89 calories, three times as much. Substitute an artificial sweetener and it will have zero calories.

To brew tea, start with fresh cold water by running your tap water for 30 seconds before filling the teakettle. For black tea, heat water to a rolling boil, pour over tea bags and steep for two minutes. Sweeten and pour over ice. Green and white teas require less heat to steep so bring the water just to the point where tiny bubbles begin to form. A quicker method is to buy cold brew tea bags, which eliminates the task of heating the water. Several companies produce an iced tea maker that even my husband can manage to operate!

For more than a century, tea has been used for medicinal purposes or health benefits. It contains the antioxidants catechins and flavonoids, believed to help prevent heart disease and certain types of cancer. Home brewed has more antioxidants than the commercial teas sold in cans and bottles. Both green and black tea offer health benefits.

ORANGE-NUTMEG TEA

1 cup unsweetened powdered instant tea
1 cup granulated sugar
1 package (0.15 ounces) unsweetened orange-flavored soft drink mix
1 teaspoon ground nutmeg

In a small bowl, combine all ingredients; stir until well blended. Store in an airtight container.

To serve: Stir 2 tablespoons tea mix into 6 ounces hot or cold water.

RUBY SPICED MINT TEA

4 1/2 cups water
1 cup loosely packed fresh mint leaves
3 tablespoons sugar
3 whole cloves
1 (3-inch) cinnamon stick
6 cranberry-flavored tea bags

Combine first 5 ingredients in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil; cover, remove from heat, and let cool to room temperature. Add tea bags. Bring to a boil; cover, remove from heat, and let cool to room temperature. Remove and discard tea bags. Strain and serve over ice. Makes 4 (1-cup) servings (43 calories, 0.2 grams of fat).

Deborah Rhoades, MA, RD, LDN, is a licensed Registered Dietitian and Extension Educator in Family and Consumer Sciences. For more information about the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County Office check out our website <http://Frederick.umd.edu>

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