Get the Better newsletter.

SUBSCRIBE

Matsu ‘to rub’ + cha ‘tea’ = matcha

Matsu ‘to rub’ + cha ‘tea’ = matcha

What is it about the magical, mystical properties of this ground green tea that makes it one of the most desirable ingredients among the fashion and wellness warrior set? Is it a legit health boost that should be integrated into your daily regimen? Or a [health fad doomed to fall by way of coconut oil](https://www.nbcnews.com/better/wellness/should-you-really-be-putting-coconut-oil-everything-n748526)?

Evidence pointing to a boost exists in abundance. But first, let’s clarify what matcha is to begin with — in case you were trapped under something heavy these past few years. It’s basically green tea, derived from the leaves of the Camellia sinensis plant, finely ground. [Oxford’s Living Dictionary](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/matcha) cites its origins in Japan as a combo of two terms, “from matsu ‘to rub’ + cha ‘tea’, from Chinese (Mandarin dialect) chá (see tea).” Matcha masters [House of Matcha](https://houseofmatcha.jp/pages/about-matcha-tea-products) say the beverage is steeped in history. “Samurai warriors drank matcha green tea before going into battle because of its energizing properties, and Zen Buddhist monks drank it as a way to flow through meditation while remaining alert,” reads the website.

Matcha is not just exotic in sound but in formulation, ranging from lower “cooking grade” powders to more expensive “ceremonial grade” powders, with enough selection to agonize over when choosing one to top your chia pudding.

To get the best quality matcha (according to the matcha set, it matters), make sure your matcha is bright green — the greener, the better. The darker the matcha, the older the matcha, and its beneficial properties weaken over time.

SCIENCE BEHIND MATCHA'S HEALTH HAL

According to science, matcha is something of a miracle supplement. For one, it makes you feel good. One recent [study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28056735) examined the effects of the phytochemicals in green tea on mood and cognition. The combo of caffeine (present in most green teas) and L-theanine, an amino acid found in some teas, were found to “improve performance in attention-switching tasks and alertness, but to a lesser extent than caffeine alone,” partly because of how L-theanine chills you out.

On the same note, another [study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27765356) performed on mice, found that drinking green tea does, in fact, reduce stress and curb the bouncy jitters one might get from drinking a caffeinated beverage.

Mind you, green tea is caffeinated and matcha is an even more caffeinated form of green tea, containing approximately 34mgs of caffeine where traditional green tea averages at about 30mgs and an espresso has around 60mgs, but the L-theanine in matcha prolongs its mood-boosting effects.

Another big draw health benefit-wise is that matcha, like green tea, is loaded with antioxidants. A [study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25191312), published in 2014, found the plant also had antimicrobial properties, particularly the four types of catechins (antioxidant properties flavonoids) it contains, against a few different types of microorganisms. Yet another study, published in [Nature](https://www.nature.com/articles/srep44815), proved that catechins inhibit the growth of a bacteria called Fusobacterium nucleatum — the bacteria that causes cavities and periodontal disease.

Those magical catechins also have tons of potential in helping people with heart issues. “Catechins present in green tea have the ability to prevent atherosclerosis, hypertension, endothelial dysfunction, ischemic heart diseases, cardiomyopathy, cardiac hypertrophy and congestive heart failure by decreasing oxidative stress, preventing inflammatory events, reducing platelet aggregation and halting the proliferation of vascular smooth muscle cells,” explains the author of the [study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23845542), published in the Chinese Journal of Natural Medicines.

There was also much hype that the winning caffeine and catechin combo stimulates the nervous system, which is said to rev your metabolism by stoking the thermogenesis (burning stored energy) process and fat oxidation, though only ever so slightly. A piece on [NPR](http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/11/10/432727282/will-drinking-green-tea-boost-your-metabolism-no-so-fast) revealed the increase is practically negligible and can’t be sustained over time.

 Matcha ice cream is a popular ice cream flavor in Japan and abroad

HOW TO USE MATCHA: THE DOS AND DON'TS

Even with negligible evidence that matcha can boost a weight-loss regimen, the substance remains heavily endorsed. Philadelphia-based nutritionist [Marjorie Cohn](http://www.mncnutrition.com/) regularly enjoys matcha, adding it to her smoothies and chia seed pudding — even mixing it into her recipe for organic vanilla ice cream. She often recommends it to clients looking to cut out coffee, or to “hard core caffeine addicts” prone to reaching for a second or third cup of coffee.

“It's easy to get lost in the hype. The tendency is to imagine that more is better, and that's just not the case.”

“The research is still in the discovery phase on matcha but seems as though our ancient ancestors got it right with this one,” she says.

Though matcha is a “nutritional powerhouse,” [Janie Zeitlin](http://www.nutritionistjanie.com/), a registered dietitian in White Plains, NY and New York City, says it’s not for everyone, and that pregnant and nursing women should skip it altogether.

“Consuming too much of this potent antioxidant has been linked to decreased iron absorption, lead contamination, liver damage if taken with acetaminophen and to altered effectiveness of prescription medications. In fact, these adverse effects may be three times as likely to occur when drinking matcha as opposed to brewed green tea,” she says.

It seems matcha has more going for it than coconut oil, but it’s not a magical elixir to OD on. “It's easy to get lost in the hype,” says Zeitlin. “The tendency is to imagine that more is better, and that's just not the case.”

One-1/2 teaspoon serving of matcha, no more than once daily, is certainly a valuable addition to any diet, says Zeitlin. Like with another substance currently having a moment, turmeric, you can get your dose by eating or drinking it, though Zeitlin says drinking it as a tea, how it was initially intended, provides all the benefits without the added calories.