

'Healthy' herbal teas that can be bad for your waist and damage your teeth

By LOUISE ATKINSON

WHEN you want to avoid the jittery effects of coffee, it's tempting to reach for a cup of caffeine-free herbal tea — which many of us are now doing.

Figures published in the Tea & Coffee Trade Journal show a post-pandemic rise in 'functional beverages', including herbal teas, with manufacturers predicting a nine per cent rise in sales over the next year.

But if you've been seduced by the 'health halo' of tea-based beverages, check the label first, as the ingredients lists of some virtuous-sounding options include everything from multi-coloured sugary sprinkles, which add calories, to citric acid, which attacks tooth enamel, and freeze-dried fruit, which can contribute to tooth decay.

One tea we looked at provides as much as four teaspoons of sugar in each cup — the same as a KitKat.

Some herbal teas seem pretty blameless. Bird & Blend, for instance, has developed a range of natural (and environmentally friendly) loose leaf tea blends that use ingredients such as liquorice root, cocoa shells and natural flavourings to create the taste of chocolate digestive biscuits, Nutella pancakes or carrot cake with no sugar and none of the calories.

But watch out for other varieties from the same company.

A recent addition is the Swizzels Love Hearts tea (£9.50 for 12 bags), which mimics the flavours of the sweets.

It contains (in order) apple pieces, rosehip, hibiscus, elderberries, 'sprinkles' — made from sugar, potato starch, maltodextrin (another form of sugar) and coconut fat. It also contains three different 'E-number' food colourings plus a 'glazing agent'.

DENTISTS have long warned against adding sugar to tea or coffee.

'Sipping sweetened tea means you are bathing your mouth in a dilute sugar solution, delivering sugar into every tight corner,' says Sam Jethwa, a dentist at Bespoke Smile practice in Marlow, Bucks.

The sugar attaches to the teeth, creating a sticky film.

'If this film is not brushed off, or rinsed with water, bacteria will feed on these sugar molecules, releasing acids which slowly disintegrate the enamel of your teeth, causing sensitivity, discoloration and decay,' he says.

The sprinkles, he adds, make the tea comparable to any other sugary drink, such as squash.

'With sweetened drinks, the big issue is that people sip them over time,' says Sam Jethwa. 'Although



Picture: SHUTTERSTOCK

a hot drink is no more damaging to the teeth than a cold one, you're more likely to sip hot drinks, so any sugar solution stays in the mouth for longer.'

Some teas (such as Cherry Cola Bottles tea from Bird & Blend, £3.50) achieve their flavour without sugar, using freeze-dried fruit (in this case, cranberry and cherry) — but Sam Jethwa says: 'Freeze-dried fruit contains less water than fresh fruit and becomes incredibly sticky.'

'This means it will stay in your mouth for a longer amount of time, increasing the risk of tooth decay and cavities.'

Similarly, Sicilian Lemonade Fruit Tea bags from *truetea-company.co.uk* (£4.80 for 15), contain pineapple cubes dipped in sugar, apple pieces (with citric acid), and freeze-dried lemon and redcurrants.

But Krisi Smith, founder of Bird & Blend, argues that the tea containing sprinkles is markedly

different from 'sweetened tea' as the sprinkles are tiny and sparse — 'you might get one or two in each cup' — while the freeze-dried fruit is there to impart flavour. 'When you drink the tea, you won't be actually eating the fruit pieces, and the amount per cup is minimal,' she says.

Separately, the U.S. trend for 'instant' tea has arrived here.

In these products, the tea leaves are ground down with other ingredients into a powder-like state that dissolves in hot water.

Whittard has launched a range of fruity instant teas, with flavours such as apple, strawberry and watermelon, mango and passionfruit, lychee and mango, costing £10 for 22 cups.

But sugar is the first ingredient on the label and 'tea extract' only makes up 1 per cent of the product. When you pour boiling water over three teaspoons, as directed, you end up with a drink containing a whopping 19g of

sugar. 'That's more than four teaspoons!' says dietitian Sarah Schenker. 'It's astonishing. That's as much sugar as a KitKat — and I've never even met a builder who has asked for more than two teaspoons in the cup!'

She also points out that the long list of ingredients identifies many of these teas as 'ultra-processed foods' (UPFs) — and an excess intake of these has now been linked to health problems.

'If you already eat more than two portions of UPFs a day, drinking another is just an unnecessary addition to a potentially toxic load,' says Sarah Schenker.

Don't assume a 'chai latte' will be a healthier option, either.

Chai is a blend of tea and spices, but the added sugar and milk notch up the calories.

One brand, Revolution, has reishi mushroom powder in its spicy chai latte mix (£8 for 200g), but each cup delivers 170 calories, 5.8g of sugar (listed as 'organic raw crystallised coconut nectar' but equivalent to a heaped teaspoon) and 8.8g of fat.

Even some no-sugar teas contain ingredients that could compromise your dental health.

Sam Jethwa identifies the second ingredient (after sugar) on a pack of the Whittard instant tea range as citric acid, which, he says, increases acidity in the mouth that can contribute to erosion of the tooth enamel.

He adds that many herbal or flavoured teas are made up of ingredients (such as hibiscus) which, like everyday tea, contain tannins (a bitter compound derived from polyphenols).

TOO many tannins can discolour teeth, he says. 'The best way to avoid this is to sip water alongside your tea, to wash away tannins and avoid them sticking to the teeth.'

Nor should you drink tea before you brush your teeth each morning, because the fluoride in toothpaste offers protection against staining and erosion.

And never drink sweet tea before bed without brushing your teeth afterwards: 'Otherwise, bacteria in your mouth will feed off the sugar, producing acid which erodes the enamel while you sleep,' says Sam Jethwa.

'Brushing your teeth should be the first thing you do each day and the last thing you do at night — but wait 30 minutes after brushing before you eat or drink, and wait 30 minutes after eating or drinking before you brush your teeth to ensure you are not brushing softened tooth enamel.'

'Plus, it's better to gulp your sweetened drinks rather than sip them,' he adds. 'This means any sugary liquid spends minimal time bathing the teeth — or use a straw to protect the teeth.' But let any hot drink cool down first.

When a standard cuppa is better

WHAT about tea with added vitamins? Costa Coffee, for instance, charges £3.25 for a cup of hot fruity tea containing vitamins B6 or C.

Dietitian Sarah Schenker says such tea can deliver woefully small quantities of the vitamins (in Costa's, 0.2mg of vitamin B6 or 12mg of vitamin C).

Meanwhile, Twinings Superblends Immune Support (£3.50 for 20 bags) delivers just

1.25mcg of vitamin D (the daily recommendation is 10mcg).

'When an ordinary cup of tea served with a splash of milk delivers both health-enhancing polyphenols [beneficial compounds] and calcium [20 per cent of your daily needs in four cups of tea], stop fussing about with cleverly marketed trendy varieties and stick to the basics,' says Sarah Schenker.

Under the microscope



WELSH opera singer Sir Bryn Terfel, 58, answers our health quiz ...

CAN YOU RUN UP THE STAIRS?

YES, but since I broke my leg just before lockdown, I'm more cautious. I slipped, did a beautiful prima ballerina turn, but my foot didn't move. So it was a triple fracture out of absolutely nothing. I cycle to the Opera House when in London. I love to swim — it's great for breath control.

GET YOUR FIVE A DAY?

WHEN I'm touring, I tend to get invited to restaurants and I've learned to have fish and grilled veg. Broccoli seems to be around the kitchen these days for the kids, aged six and three [his children with wife, harpist Hannah Stone, 36].

EVER DIETED?

I WOULDN'T say that I worry about my weight, though I do love it when you return to a production and your costume still fits. [At 6ft 3in, he weighs 22st.]

ANY VICERS?

CRISPS.

ANY FAMILY AILMENTS?

NO. Both my parents are in their 80s — my father is a retired farmer, but still incredibly fit. He spent his life walking up a mountain in the morning to check his stock and the dry-stone walls. My mother's the same.

WORST ILLNESS/INJURY?

MY BACK. I was singing in New York in the 1990s when I picked up a mandolin and slipped a disc in my back. Unfortunately, this was on a raked stage [which slopes back from the audience], and maybe because of a previous injury from working on the farm, throwing hay bales, the back decided to give up. I limped into the hospital and walked out casually post surgery!



The last time I had trouble with it, I had an injection into the joint. This, touch wood, has kept me away from the surgeon's knife.

EVER HAVE PLASTIC SURGERY?

NO, I like to keep my Meat Loaf facial beauty.

TRIED ALTERNATIVE REMEDIES?

I'M A big advocate of ginger, boiling it and putting it in the fridge to drink as a tonic for my voice.

EVER BEEN DEPRESSED?

NO. What does get me down is when Manchester United lose or when Wales lose at the rugby.

LIKE TO LIVE FOR EVER?

ABSOLUTELY not.

■ SIR Bryn Terfel's new album, *Sea Songs*, is out now on Deutsche Grammophon.

Interview by LOUISE FLIND