

Coffee, Tea, and Wine: How Everyday Drinks Stain and Wear Teeth

By JoD Lifestyle · 6 min read

Most of us don't think of our favourite drink as a dental decision. A flat white on the walk to work, a pot of tea through the afternoon, a glass of red with dinner — these are small pleasures, not health choices. Yet the colour of your teeth over a decade owes a lot to what's in your cup, and so does the surface hardness of your enamel.

The good news is that staining and wear are gradual, not instant. Understanding how they happen gives you a handful of easy adjustments that let you keep the ritual without surrendering the shade of your smile.

Two different problems: staining and softening

It helps to separate the two things a drink can do. Staining is about colour. Softening — technically erosion — is about the mineral surface of the tooth. Some drinks do one, some do both, and the fixes differ.

How stains settle onto enamel

Tooth enamel looks smooth, but under magnification it is porous, with a thin protein film called the pellicle sitting on top. Deeply pigmented drinks contain compounds called chromogens and tannins that cling to that film. Over repeated exposure, those pigments build into visible surface staining — what dentists call extrinsic stain, because it sits on the outside of the tooth rather than within it.

The usual suspects are predictable:

- **Coffee** — rich in chromogens and mildly acidic; one of the more common causes of yellow-brown surface stain.
- **Tea** — especially black tea, which is high in tannins that help pigment stick. In some cases tea stains more readily than coffee.
- **Red wine** — a triple threat of deep pigment, tannins, and acidity.
- **Cola and dark soft drinks** — pigment plus a notably acidic, sugary base.

Extrinsic staining is largely a surface matter, which is why it responds reasonably well to routine cleaning and, where appropriate, whitening. Intrinsic staining — colour change from within the tooth, due to things like certain medications, trauma, or ageing — behaves differently and is harder to shift.

How acidic drinks soften the surface

Erosion is the quieter issue. Enamel starts to lose minerals when the mouth drops below roughly a pH of 5.5. Many everyday drinks sit well under that: cola, sports and energy drinks, citrus and other fruit juices, wine, and even some sparkling waters with added flavouring.

A short acid dip is normal, and saliva works to neutralise it and redeposit minerals over the following stretch of time. The trouble comes with frequency. Sipping an acidic drink steadily over an hour keeps the mouth in an acidic state far longer than finishing it in ten minutes, and that repeated exposure can gradually thin enamel. Thinner, softer enamel also stains more easily and can look more yellow as the darker dentine underneath shows through.

Everyday habits that genuinely help

You don't need to give up coffee to protect your teeth. A few practical changes do most of the work.

- **Drink it, don't nurse it.** Finishing a drink within a reasonable window is easier on enamel than sipping the same cup across a whole morning.
- **Rinse with water afterward.** A quick swish of plain water helps clear pigment and dilute acid. Keep a glass of water beside your coffee or wine.
- **Use a straw for cold, dark, acidic drinks.** Iced coffee, cola, and juice can bypass the front teeth to some degree with a straw. It is less relevant for hot drinks.
- **Wait before you brush.** After something acidic, enamel is temporarily softened. Brushing right away can wear away more of that softened layer. Waiting is kinder to the surface; rinsing with water in the meantime bridges the gap.
- **Pair drinks with food or milk.** Cheese, milk, and water help buffer acid, and chewing food encourages saliva flow.

What whitening can and can't do

If stains have already set in, surface discolouration from drinks is often a good match for whitening, because it sits on the outside of the tooth. That said, results vary from person to person, and whitening does not change the colour of fillings, crowns, or veneers. Deeper intrinsic discolouration may respond only partly or not at all.

Before trying a shop-bought kit on your own, it is worth having the cause of the discolouration assessed. A dentist can tell surface staining apart from other kinds of colour change, flag any sensitivity or erosion that would make whitening uncomfortable, and talk through realistic outcomes. If you are weighing your choices, reviewing the [teeth whitening options](#) offered through a dental office is a sensible first step, since supervised whitening is tailored to your teeth rather than a one-size-fits-all tray. A professional cleaning alone also lifts a surprising amount of everyday coffee and tea stain.

A quick comparison

Drink	Staining potential	Acidity concern
Coffee (black)	High	Mild
Black tea	High	Low to mild
Red wine	High	Moderate to high
Cola / dark soda	Moderate	High
Citrus and fruit juice	Low to moderate	High
Water	None	None

Adding milk to coffee or tea lightens the drink and can modestly reduce how much pigment reaches your teeth, though it does not cancel staining entirely.

Frequently asked questions

Does coffee really stain teeth, or is that a myth?

It is real. Coffee is high in the pigment compounds that cling to the thin film on enamel, which is why regular coffee drinkers often notice a gradual yellow-brown surface tint. How much it shows depends on how often you drink it, your enamel, and your cleaning habits.

How can I drink coffee without staining my teeth as much?

Finish it within a reasonable time rather than sipping for hours, rinse with water afterward, and keep up regular cleanings. Adding milk can help a little. None of this makes coffee stain-proof, but together these habits slow the build-up noticeably.

Is sparkling water bad for teeth?

Plain carbonated water is only mildly acidic and is generally considered far gentler than soda or juice. Flavoured or citrus-infused versions can be more acidic, so they are better enjoyed with a meal than sipped all day.

Should I brush right after a glass of wine?

It is better to wait a bit. Wine's acidity temporarily softens enamel, and brushing immediately can wear away more of that softened surface. Rinse with water first, then brush a little later.

Sources & further reading

- [Canadian Dental Association — Your Oral Health](#) — general guidance on diet, enamel, and keeping teeth healthy.
- [Government of Canada — Your Oral Health](#) — plain-language public health information on caring for teeth and gums.
- [Ontario Dental Association](#) — patient resources and how to find care in Ontario.