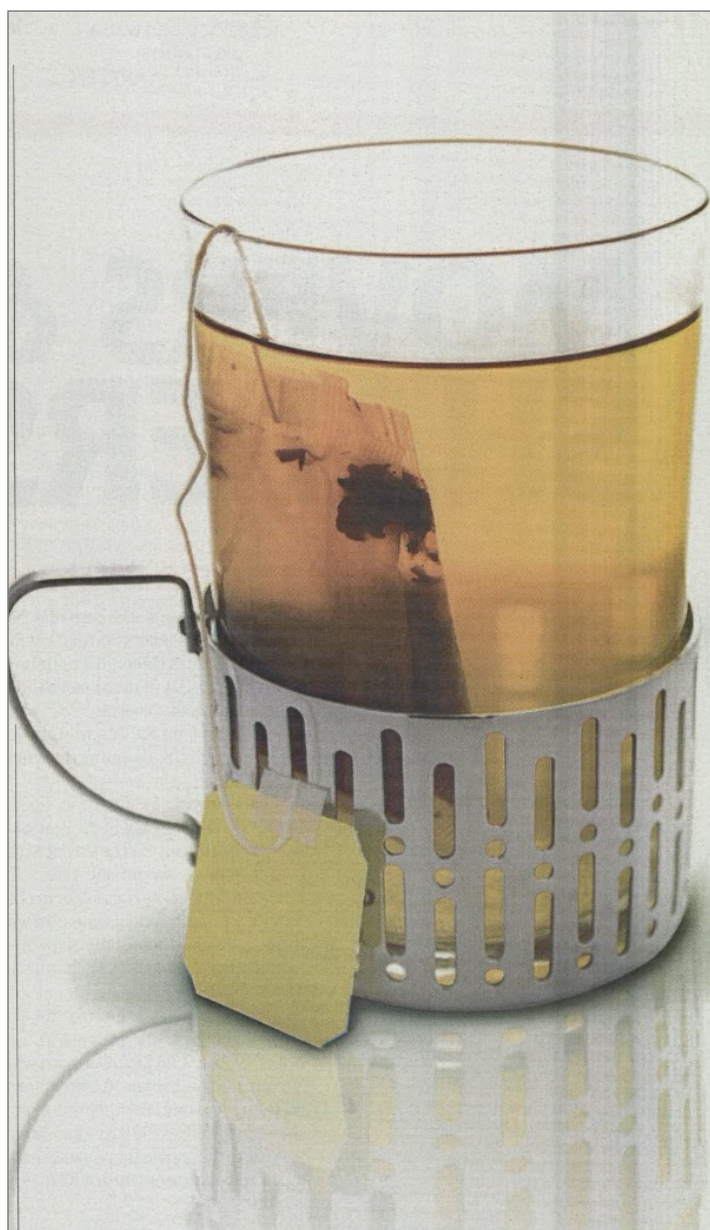


eye The Sunday EXPRESS



Tea time

Here's why your favourite beverage always hits the spot ■ SHARON FERNANDES

TEA IS everyone's quick pick-me-up. In the middle of the day, when work weighs you down, a tea break seems like the perfect way to relax. What is it about the beverage that has people hooked? "Tea has antioxidants and caffeine. While the antioxidants help fight free radicals that degenerate the body, the caffeine in the tea acts as a stimulant," says Dr Prameet Kaur, senior dietician, All India Institute of Medical Sciences.

But caffeine alone is not the one responsible for lifting your spirits. Theanine, an amino acid found as a natural component of tea, has only recently begun to be understood for its effects in helping the brain stay alert. "Theanine is present in all teas. You need to have a right blend of teas to get the optimum level of theanine. It works on the brain and is found to increase alpha brain waves, which are associated with an alert state of mind," says Dr Niti Desai, consultant nutritionist, Cumbala Hill Hospital, Mumbai.

According to Desai, 3-4 cups of tea will make sure you have enough theanine to keep you alert for hours. "It keeps you sharp and calm. Caffeine from coffee may give you short-term alertness but too much can make you irritable," she says.

If theanine sounds like the perfect excuse to sip more tea, dieticians say moderation is key. "While having tea is fine, since green and black tea contain anti-oxidants, most people take tea with sugar and milk, and end up piling on calories. Green tea or other herbal teas can be had in larger amounts compared to other sweetened tea," says Dr Honey Khanna,

senior dietician, Max Hospital, Delhi. "Avoid tea at night as it can hamper sleep patterns," says Kaur. "Also avoid tea with meals as its effects are lost. The best time is to have it in the morning or evening, between meals," says Khanna.

While staying focussed is a short-term gain of consuming tea, there are long-term gains too. "Tea is considered to be anti-cancer. It is also found to lower cholesterol and good for dental health," she says. Green tea, however, finds more favour with the experts. Black tea, with a higher amount of caffeine, comes second. "The caffeine in tea is much less, almost half of that in coffee, so it keeps you calm, and focussed at the same time. The theanine also helps keep you stay sharper for long," says Desai.

In March 2006, the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* published guidelines for beverage consumption, developed by the US Beverage Guidance Panel. These experts reviewed years of research on beverages and health to make recommendations for adults.

The panel stressed that a healthy diet should not rely on fluids to provide calorie or nutrient needs, and that water is necessary for metabolism and normal physiological function. In fact, water is the only fluid that the body truly needs. However, next on the list was tea and coffee, as preferred beverages. The recommended unsweetened coffee and tea (iced and hot), consumption was listed as up to eight servings a day of tea, up to four servings of coffee.

We can surely drink to that. ♦