



Aromatherapy

What is aromatherapy?

Aromatherapy is the controlled and skilled use of essential oils extracted from various plants, roots, bark, branches, flowers, and leaves. Essential oils are used to maintain and promote health and well being, often combining the soothing, healing touch of massage with the therapeutic properties of essential oils.



Aromatherapy is a holistic treatment that can have a profound effect on the mind, body and emotions through stimulation of the immune system. Advocates of aromatherapy claim that it's effective in treating certain illnesses, preventing disease, and reducing stress.

True aromatherapy uses only the highest quality of pure essential oils from plants, and must not be combined, blended or contaminated with natural or synthetic substances. Essential oils can contain hundreds of organic constituents, including hormones, vitamins and other natural elements that work on many levels. Neither aromatherapy nor essential oils are regulated by any governmental body.

How does it work?

Aromatherapy is based on the theory that inhalation or absorption of essential oils triggers changes within the limbic system, the part of the brain associated with memory and emotion. This can, in turn, stimulate physiological responses of the nervous, endocrine or immune systems, affecting heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, brain wave activity, and the release of various hormones throughout the body.

Their effect on the brain can either sedate or stimulate the nervous system, as well as possibly aid in normalizing hormonal secretions. Inhaling essential oils can ease respiratory symptoms, while localized application of diluted oils can be helpful for certain localized conditions. Massage combined with essential oils provides relaxation, as well as relief from pain and muscle stiffness and spasms. Some essential oils applied to the skin can have anti-microbial, antiseptic, anti-fungal, or anti-inflammatory properties. Although essential oils produce certain predictable effects, they also may affect different people in different ways.

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How are treatments done?

Essential oils can be inhaled, massaged onto the skin, diffused into the air, applied as a compress, or placed in a bath for soaking.

- **Inhalation** treatments are usually recommended for problems with respiration and can be done by dropping several drops of essential oil into a bowl of steaming water. The vapors are then inhaled for a few moments, with the effect being enhanced by placing a towel over both the head and the bowl to form a tent to capture the humidified air and scent.
- **Massage** using aromatic essential oils combined with a base oil can be either calming or stimulating, depending on the oil used. The essential oil massage can be applied to a specific problem area or to the entire body.
- **Diffusion** is normally used to calm or soothe nerves or treat some respiratory problems and can be done by spraying oil-containing compounds into the air in a fashion similar to an air freshener. It can also be done by placing a few drops of essential oil in a diffuser and turning on the heat source. Sitting within three feet of the diffuser, a treatment normally lasts about 30 minutes.
- **Hot or cold compresses** containing essential oils can be used for muscle aches and pains, bruises or headaches.
- **Soaking baths** containing essential oils and lasting for 10-20 minutes are recommended for skin problems and for calming or soothing nerves.

What are the benefits?

Aromatherapy can be effective in treating pain, muscle disorders, arthritis, indigestion, headaches, skin disorders, and both viral and bacterial infections. There has been some success in improving circulation, stimulating the immune system, healing wounds, relieving pain, reducing swelling and even stimulating memory.

What are the risks?

Essential oils used in aromatherapy are highly concentrated and should **never** be taken internally, as they could cause a toxic overdose. Watch for skin irritation with frequent use, and avoid prolonged exposure to the sun, as many essential oils increase skin sensitivity. Except for lavender, don't use any highly concentrated or undiluted oils on the skin. Excessive inhalation of vapors can cause headaches and fatigue; some oils, such as peppermint, may cause insomnia. Specific oils, such as origanum, sage, savory, thyme, and wintergreen, are *not* safe for home use.

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Other essential oils, most notably basil, lemon grass, fennel, rosemary, and verbena may cause irritation of sensitive skin. Many essential oils are known to cause brachial (lung) spasms, and people with asthma should not use aromatherapy before consulting with a doctor or aromatherapy practitioner. Avoid aromatherapy during pregnancy, especially the essential oils of sage, rosemary, and juniper – all of which have been known to cause contractions when taken in excess. Keep essential oils away from the eyes, and flush heavily with water if contact does occur.

If symptoms you are treating continue or if new ones appear, you should see a doctor. Many seemingly minor symptoms may be good reason to suspect a serious underlying problem.

Is aromatherapy widely used?

Aromatherapy has been used since before recorded history. Some of the earliest documented uses of aromatherapy were in ancient Egypt. Combinations of resins, oils and fragrant plants were used for ceremonial, medicinal, or pleasurable reasons in most ancient civilizations. Greek and Roman civilizations later adopted the use of aromatic oils for both medicinal and cosmetic reasons. North American Indians also used aromatic oils, smudges, and aromatic plant-based remedies. The term 'aromatherapy' was introduced by the French chemist Rene-Maurice Gattefosse in 1928.

Aromatherapy is presently about a \$1 billion dollar business in the United States, according to the National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy. In areas of Europe, it is common to find mainstream doctors who practice aromatherapy and health insurance companies that reimburse for treatments.

What to look for in a practitioner?

A good aromatherapist will be able to explain the purpose, expected outcome and duration of any treatment in an easy to understand and logical manner. Don't be afraid to ask your practitioner about his or her qualifications and training.

There is presently no official or formal licensing procedure for aromatherapists in the United States. As a result, most aromatherapy practitioners are skilled in other areas as well, such as chiropractic, psychotherapy, nursing, or massage therapy. Many aromatherapists with no other medical training or license generally work as counselors or teachers and should follow whatever regulations apply to that profession.

Aromatherapy is currently governed by several associations: *The Educational Standards in Aromatherapy Association* in conjunction with the *Natural Oils Research Association (NORA)*; *The American Alliance of Aromatherapy*; and *The National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy (NAHA)*. Schools and practitioners generally affiliate with one of these associations. These organizations hope to maintain compliance with educational standards through an examination process, ensuring ethical considerations are upheld across the community, and upholding other professional requirements for obtaining and maintaining certification as an aromatherapist.

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Is there any research about aromatherapy after SCI or TBI?

There is limited scientific research about aromatherapy and its use in individuals with spinal cord or brain injuries. Aromatherapy has demonstrated some results and promise in treating the following conditions and symptoms common among individuals with spinal cord injury:

- **Pain:** Numerous essential oils – German chamomile, lavender, lemongrass and black pepper – may reduce pain, either by numbing, producing heat or reducing inflammation.
- **Bacterial Infections:** Essential oils of bay laurel, cinnamon, oregano, savory, and thyme, though potential skin irritants, have all shown some effectiveness in dealing with bacterial infections such as urinary tract infections. Milder essential oils such as bay rum, eucalyptus, lemon grass, or lavender may also be effective.
- **Spasms and Muscle Stiffness:** Essential oils of black pepper, lemongrass, Roman chamomile and bergamot all demonstrate effectiveness in reducing muscle stiffness and /or spasms.

Using aromatherapy after traumatic brain injury can sometimes cause over-stimulation. Consult with your doctor before using aromatherapy.

How can I learn more?

If you wish to try aromatherapy, you should consider seeing a practitioner or, at the very least, do some reading on the topic in order to make informed decisions and treatments. Many books about aromatherapy are available at libraries and bookstores. Ask other alternative medicine practitioners about aromatherapy, as well as your health care professionals. A good deal of information is also available on the internet.

This brochure was prepared by the Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) Committee of Craig Hospital.