

What is aromatherapy

The word aromatherapy means "treatment using scents'.

It refers to the use of essential oils in Holistic Healing to improve health and emotional well being and in restoring balance to the body. Essential oils are aromatic essences extracted from plants, flowers, trees, fruit, bark, grasses and seeds. There are more than 150 types of oils that can be extracted. These oils have distinctive therapeutic, psychological and physiological properties that improve health and prevent illness. All essential oils have unique healing and valuable antiseptic properties. Some oils are anti-viral, anti-inflammatory, pain-relieving, anti-depressant, stimulating, relaxing, expectorating, support digestion and have diuretic properties too.

Essential oils get absorbed into our body and exert an influence on it. The residue gets dispersed from the body naturally. They can also affect our mind and emotions. They enter the body in three ways: by inhalation, absorption and consumption.

From the chemist's point of view, essential oils are a mixture of organic compounds viz., ketones, terpenes, esters, alcohol, aldehyde and hundreds of other molecules which are extremely difficult to classify, as they are small and complex. The essential oils' molecules are small. They penetrate human skin easily and enter the blood stream directly and finally get flushed out through our elementary system. A concentrate of essential oils is not greasy; it is more like water in texture and evaporates quickly. Some of them are light liquids, insoluble in water and evaporate instantly when exposed to air. It would take 100 kg of lavender to yield 3 kg of lavender oil; one would need 8 million jasmine flowers to yield barely 1 kg of jasmine oil.

Some of these aroma oils are very expensive. They are extracted using maceration. The purification process called defleurage is employed, and in some cases, fat is used instead of oil. Then this process, called enfleurage, is used for final purification.

Some of the common essential oils used in aromatherapy for their versatile application are:

1. Clary Sage (*Salvia scarea*)
2. Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*)
3. Geranium (*Pelargonium graveolens*)
4. Lavender (*Lavendula vera officinalis*)
5. Lemon (*Citrus limonem*)
6. Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*)
7. Petitgrain (*Citrus aurantium leaves*)
8. Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)
9. Tea-tree (*Melaleuca alternifolia*)
10. Ylang Ylang (*Cananga odorata*)

The oils mentioned can be good in a beginner's kit and need to be used appropriately.

History of Aromatherapy

The oldest use of aromatic oils is known to be as old as 6,000 years back when Egyptian physician, Imhotep, the then God of Medicine and Healing recommended fragrant oils for bathing and massaging. In 4,500 B.C. Egyptians used myrrh and cedar wood oils for embalming their dead and 6,500 years later the preserved mummies prove the fact discovered by the modern researchers that the cedar wood contains natural fixative and strong anti-bacterial and antiseptic properties.

Hippocrates, the Greek Father of Medicine, recommended regular aromatherapy baths and scented massages. This is what he effectively used to ward off plague from Athens.

Romans utilised essential oils for pleasure and to cure pain and also for their popular perfumed baths and massages. Emperor Nero being indulgent in orgies, feasts and fragrances employed rose frequently to cure his headaches, indigestion and to maintain his high spirits while enjoying amusements.

During the great plague in London in 1665, people burnt bundles of lavender, cedar wood and cypress in the streets and carried posies of the same plants as their only defence to combat infectious diseases

Aromatherapy received a wider acceptance in the early twentieth century. In 1930s Rene-Maurice-Gatte Fosse, a French chemist, dipped his burnt hand in lavender oil. To his surprise the wound healed very quickly without any infection or scarring. He did considerable research on various oils and their therapeutic and psychotherapeutic properties.

Dr Jean Volnet, French army surgeon extensively used essential oils in World War II. It was Madame Morquerite Murry who gave the holistic approach to aromatic oils by experimenting with them for individual problems.

Today, research has proved the multiple usage of aromatic oils. Medical research in the recent years has uncovered the fact that the odours we smell have a significant impact on the way we feel. Smells act directly on the brain like a drug according to scientific research. For instance, smelling lavender increases alpha wave frequency in the back of the head and this state is associated with relaxation.

Essential oils, like spiritual healing (Reiki, Pranic, Magnified), homeopathic, herbal and flower remedies, have a life force that vibrates within the body and the benefit exerted is too subtle to evaluate.

How Aromatherapy Works

Dr Alan Huch, a neurologist, psychiatrist and also the director of Smell and Taste Research Centre in Chicago says, "Smell acts directly on the brain, like a drug". Our nose has the capacity to distinguish 100,000 different smells, many of which affect us without our knowing about them.

The aroma enters our nose and connects with cilia, the fine hair inside the nose lining. The receptors in the cilia are linked to the olfactory bulb which is at the end of the smell tract. The end of the tract is in turn connected to the brain itself. Smells are converted by cilia into electrical impulses that are transmitted to the brain through olfactory system. All the impulses reach the limbic system. Limbic system is that part of the brain which is associated with our moods, emotions, memory and learning. All the smell that reaches the limbic system has a direct chemical effect on our moods. For example, smelling lavender increases alpha waves in the brain and it is this wave that helps us relax. A whiff of jasmine increases beta waves in the brain and this wave is associated with an increased agile and alert state.

Limbic system is also a storehouse of millions of remembered smells. That is why the mere fragrance of haystack takes us back to childhood.

The molecular sizes of the essential oils are very tiny and they can easily penetrate through the skin and get into the blood stream. It takes anything between a few seconds to two hours for the essential oils to enter the skin and within 4 hours, the toxins get out of the body through urine, perspiration and excreta.

Aromatic oils work like magic for stress-related problems, psychosomatic disorders, skin infections, hair loss, inflammations, pains arising from muscular or skeletal disorders to name some ailments. Actually essential oils have innumerable applications.

In Bristol, lavender oil was used on 28 patients who had undergone by-pass surgery. 24 of them reported reduced breathing rates, lower blood pressure and anxiety levels.

In Paris, in 1985, 28 women were given treatment for thrush using essential oils. After 90 days, the clinical examination showed that 21 of them had been cured completely.

Essential oils are safe to use. The only caution being they should never be used directly because some oils may irritate sensitive skin or cause photo-sensitivity. They should be blended in adequate proportion with the carrier oils. A patch test is necessary to rule out any reactions.

Aromatherapy is the art of using the fragrant essential oils of plants to treat ailments of the mind and body. The scent of the oils evokes a variety of different responses by stimulating the olfactory organs, which are linked to the areas of the brain that control emotions.

A series of chemical reactions, initiated by this stimulation then takes place, affecting a physical or emotional change in the body.

Using Oils

Essential oils can be used in a variety of ways at home and place of work. Some of the common ways are:

Inhalation:

Add 2-3 drops of essential oil, depending on which oil you have selected, to the hot boiling water and inhale the steam. Steaming helps open the pores of the skin and thus more oil is absorbed giving the additional benefit of a facial.

The bowl which has the hot water and the aroma oil could be left under the bed so that the room is enveloped in aromatic fragrance.

A drop or two sprinkled on a handkerchief can give a lasting benefit of the aroma oil. For a very peaceful and relaxed sleep, one or two drops of essential oils on a tissue kept inside the pillow or cushion could be used.

Diffusers and Vaporisers:

Diffusers are generally made of ceramic or clay. The diffuser has a cave like opening to house small candles or earthen oil lamps and the top is shaped like a curved cup to hold a little water and few drops of aroma oil.

Fill the top cup with water add a few drops of essential oils depending on the oil chosen then light the candle or the lamp. For the oil lamp to last long, add castor oil to the earthen lamp because castor oil burns for a very long time as compared to other oils.

Once the water and oil heat up, evaporation takes place and the whole atmosphere is filled with the aromatic scent. The process of evaporation continues for nearly five to six hours.

One can get instant relief from pain, a relaxed and positive feeling prevails when the right oil is used. One needs to be careful in choosing the right essential oil.

Vaporisers are insect repellents used normally in the form of mats or other types of vaporisers kept for repelling insects. One could reuse the used mats by adding 2-3 drops of essential oil of your own choice and keeping them lit (electrically). Slowly the smell gets released and the area is filled with soothing aroma.

Lemon or rosemary are beneficial for offices, lavender for bedroom, antiseptic tea-tree for disinfecting a sick room and citronella for repelling the insects.

Massage:

The most common form of treatment is massage because the dual benefits of touch therapy and scent therapy are simultaneously enjoyed.

Massage improves the circulation of the blood, tones the muscles, detoxifies and releases trapped energy from tense muscles. The fragrance triggers a sense of pleasure and well being. The penetration of essential oil through the skin during massages is high.

Generally, carrier oils like sunflower, coconut, olive, sweet almond, sesame and vegetable oils are mixed with aroma oils. The aroma oils should not be used for massages directly without dilution. About 10 drops or 1 teaspoon of essential oil can be mixed to about 30 ml of carrier oil. This makes a very rejuvenating massage oil.

Baths:

This is an easy way to relax using essential oils. Add the selected oil to your bathtub, stir the water well and spend 20 minutes in the tub. The aroma oil enters the body through the skin to give lasting benefits. Just a few drops are required to be added to the bathtub.

The essential oils can also be added to a bucket of water instead of a bathtub. Mix the oil in the water properly, as some of the aroma oils are insoluble in water.

Foot Bath:

You can immerse your feet in a bowl of luke warm water to which 2-3 drops of essential oil is added. This is a very refreshing experience after a hard day's work and if you have sweaty and smelly feet, then too this foot bath is very profitable.

Pot Pourri:

Pot Pourri, as the name suggests is a mixture of dried flowers, herbs, grass and seed pods.

Few drops of essential oil added to the pot pourri and kept in a bowl would keep giving out aromatic fragrance for 4-6 weeks. Another more effective method would be to keep the pot pourri mixture after adding the essential oil in a closed container overnight so that the oil gets absorbed. The next morning the box can be kept open and the lingering aroma would fill the area.

Bed Time:

Sprinkle 2-3 drops on the pillow cover or on a tissue that can be placed under the pillow or cushion cover and inhaled just before sleeping or while sleeping. This can be very useful in treating headaches, stress, tension and in boosting confidence. Some of the essential oils act as an aphrodisiac too.

Compresses:

Both cold and hot compresses are profitable.

Add 2-3 drops of aroma oil to a bowl of hot (depending on how much of heat you can withstand) or warm water and dip a hand towel or piece of cotton to enable it to absorb

the mixture then squeeze out the excess water and place the towel or cotton on the area to be treated. Leaving the compress on the area for 2 hours is quite beneficial.

Oil like lavender is usually used. This provides relief when used over bruises, skin problems and premenstrual syndromes.

To make a cold compress, add 6 cubes of ice to a bowl with 2-3 drops of essential oil and dip a hand towel or a piece of cotton to absorb the mixture then squeeze out the excess water and place the towel or cotton on the area to be treated. Cold compress is highly helpful in treating burns, sore feet, hangover, sprains and headaches. After a facial the use of hot and cold compress alternately helps the skin.

Oral Intake:

It is an accepted practice abroad to take essential oil orally as it is safe. However, care should be taken to take it only under the supervision or guidance of an experienced aromatherapy practitioner. Few oils can be taken internally in prescribed dosage for a particular problem like indigestion under the guidance of a qualified therapist only.

Beauty Treatment:

Aroma oils have been used as an application for the skin from times immemorial. As they are highly soothing in treating and enhancing the natural beauty of the skin they can be safely incorporated in facials, massages, manicures, pedicures, scalp treatment, hair wash, hair treatment along with other creams and oils.

Rose, chamomile, lemon, lavender, geranium, sandalwood are some good oils for facials irrespective of the fact that beauty treatment is given to normal, mature, dry, oily, sensitive or problem skin. Either one of these or a combination of two could be used.

The carrier oils that are helpful in a beauty treatment are sweet almond, wheat germ, peach kernel, apricot kernel and sunflower. Steam facials with essential oils are also rejuvenating and help in improving skin texture.

Room Sprays:

There is a call for protecting the environment and this is becoming a prime concern worldwide. Aerosols are being discouraged due to their ozone depleting properties.

Essential oils are natural and hence they could be used liberally to deodorise a room, freshen and scent your bathroom, living-room, bedroom, dining-room, office cabin, etc. Merely add 10-12 drops of aroma oil to half a litre of water and spray the mixture with the help of a spray bottle.

Oils like lavender, lemon, peppermint, pine and rosemary are best for this application. Cupboards, wardrobes can also be disinfected. If a room smells of dampness or there are moulds in the hotel rooms, houses, offices or factories and shops the essential oil along with water can be sprayed.

Insect Repellents:

Essential oils are excellent fragrant dispenser and non toxic insecticides.

Just 2-3 drops of essential oil can be used on pillow covers, mattresses or used mosquito mats (this can be electrically reused) or applied to the exposed skin after blending with carrier oil before going to bed to repel insects.

Lemongrass is best for flying insects, tea-tree for ants and fleas, thyme for crawling pests, camphor for moths and citronella for mosquitoes.