Aromatherapy: What you need to know

Aromatherapy, or essential oil therapy, refers to a range of traditional, alternative or complementary therapies that use essential oils and other aromatic plant compounds.

Essential oils have been used for nearly 6,000 years, with the aim of improving a person's health or mood.

The National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy (NAHA) defines aromatherapy as "the therapeutic application or the medicinal use of aromatic substances (essential oils) for holistic healing."

In 1997, the International Standards Organization (ISO) defined an essential oil as a "product obtained from vegetable raw material, either by distillation with water or steam, or from the epicarp of citrus fruits by a mechanical process, or by dry distillation."

A range of essential oils have been found to have various degrees of antimicrobial activity and are believed to have antiviral, nematicidal, antifungal, insecticidal, and antioxidant properties. Aromatherapy applications include massage, topical applications, and inhalation.

**Using aromatherapy**

* A range of essential oils may help boost health and wellbeing.
* Aromatherapy is normally used through inhalation or as a topical application.
* Inhalation: the oils evaporate into the air using a diffuser container, spray, or oil droplets, or breathed in, for example, in a steam bath.
* Apart from providing a pleasant smell, aromatherapy oils can provide respiratory disinfection, decongestant, and psychological benefits.
* Inhaling essential oils stimulates the olfactory system, the part of the brain connected to smell, including the nose and the brain.
* Molecules that enter the nose or mouth pass to the lungs, and from there, to other parts of the body.
* As the molecules reach the brain, they affect limbic system, which is linked to the emotions, the heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, memory, stress, and hormone balance. In this way, essential oils can have a subtle, yet holistic effect on the body.
* Topical applications: massage oils, and bath and skin care products are absorbed through the skin. Massaging the area where the oil is to be applied can boost circulation and increase absorption. Some argue that areas that are richer in sweat glands and hair follicles, such as the head or the palms of the hand, may absorb the oils more effectively.

**Benefits**

Aromatherapy is a complementary therapy. It does not provide a cure for diseases, rashes or illnesses, but it can support conventional treatment of various conditions.

**It has been shown to reduce:**

•Nausea

•Pain and body aches

•Anxiety, agitation, stress, and depression

•Fatigue and insomnia

•Muscular aches

•Headaches

•Circulatory problems

•Menstrual problems

•Menopausal problems

•Alopecia, or hair loss

**What do essential oils do?**

•Basil essential oil is used to sharpen concentration and alleviate some of the symptoms of depression. It may relieve headaches and migraines. It should be avoided during pregnancy.

•Bergamot essential oil is said to be useful for the urinary tract and digestive tract. When combined with eucalyptus oil it may help relieve skin problems, including those caused by stress and chicken pox.

•Black pepper essential oil is commonly used for stimulating the circulation, muscular aches and pains, and bruises. Combined with ginger essential oil, it is used to reduce arthritis pain and improve flexibility.

•Chamomile essential oil can treat eczema

•Citronella essential oil is a relative of lemongrass and acts as an insect repellent

•Clove essential oil is a topical analgesic, or painkiller, that is commonly used for toothache. It is also used as an antispasmodic antiemetic, for preventing vomiting and nausea, and as a carminative, preventing gas in the gut. It has antimicrobial, antioxidant and antifungal properties.

•Eucalyptus essential oil can help relieve the airways during a cold or flu. It is often combined with peppermint. Many people are allergic to eucalyptus, so care should be taken.

•Geranium essential oil can be used for skin problems, to reduce stress, and as a mosquito repellant.

•Jasmine essential oil has been described as an aphrodisiac. While scientific evidence is lacking, research has shown that the odor of jasmine increases beta waves, which are linked to alertness. As a stimulant, it might increase penile blood flow.

•Lavender essential oil is used as an antiseptic for minor cuts and burns and to enhance relaxation and sleep. It is said to relieve headache and migraine symptoms.

•Lemon essential oil is said to improve mood, and to help relieve the symptoms of stress and epression.

•Rosemary essential oil may promote hair growth, boost memory, prevent muscle spasms, and support the circulatory and nervous systems.

•Sandalwood essential oil is believed by some to have aphrodisiac qualities.

•Tea tree essential oil is said to have antimicrobial, antiseptic, and disinfectant qualities. It is commonly used in shampoos and skin care products, to treat acne, burns, and bites. It features in mouth rinses but it should never be swallowed, as it is toxic.

Thyme essential oil is said to help reduce fatigue, nervousness, and stress.

•Yarrow essential oil is used to treat symptoms of cold and flu, and to help reduce joint inflammation.



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