
Aromatherapy

Summary

- Aromatherapy is the use of aromatic plant oils to bring about physiological and emotional changes.
 - Aromatic plant oils should never be swallowed or applied undiluted to the skin.
-

Aromatherapy is the use of aromatic plant oils, including essential oils, for psychological and physical wellbeing. Aromatherapists blend therapeutic essential oils especially for each person and suggest methods of use such as topical application, massage, inhalation or water immersion to stimulate the desired responses.

The different smells (aromas), and the chemical constituents of the oils, can produce different emotional and physiological reactions. Essential oils can be massaged into the skin, added to bath water or vaporised in an oil burner. Although aromatherapy has been practised for centuries in various cultures, the modern version was developed mainly in France.

Aromatherapy has not yet undergone as much scientific scrutiny as other complementary therapies, but it may be effective in helping with some complaints.

Risks of aromatherapy

Some aromatic plant oils are toxic and should never be used at all – for example, camphor, pennyroyal and wintergreen.

Aromatic plant oils are very potent and should never be swallowed or applied undiluted to the skin. People with asthma and those prone to nose bleeds should use caution when inhaling vaporising oils. Do not use aromatic plant oils in any orifice such as ears, mouth or vagina.

Aromatic plant oils (essential oils) can be poisonous if taken in by mouth. Consumption of essential oils is an increasing cause of poisoning in children. All aromatic plant oils should be secured and kept out of reach of children. If poisoning occurs, ring triple zero (000) or the Victorian Poisons Information Centre on 131 126.

Pregnant women and people with certain conditions, including epilepsy and high blood pressure, should consult their doctor before using any aromatic plant oils. Some oils can be dangerous during pregnancy and for people with certain conditions.

Sensitivity to aromatic plant oils

Undiluted aromatic plant oils used over sensitive areas, such as nostrils or on sensitive skin, could irritate or burn the skin. In some cases, there may be an allergic reaction such as a skin rash in susceptible people.

Some of the oils that may cause problems include:

- eucalyptus
- ginger (carbon dioxide extracted)
- thyme
- black pepper
- cinnamon

- clove
- oregano
- lemongrass
- basil
- some citrus oils.

Using essential oils

Essential oils are extracted from plant material using steam or water distillation. Selected plant materials are heated with steam, water or both until the essential oil vaporises. The oil then condenses as it cools.

All volatile aromatic plant oils are concentrated plant oils. They should be used sparingly, only a few drops at a time and always diluted in some other medium, such as plain massage oil (cold-pressed vegetable oil) or unscented base cream (but not a mineral oil cream, such as most brands of sorbolene or baby oil). Aromatic plant oils do not dissolve in water unless mixed with a dispersant first.

Aromatic plant oils, including essential oils, should never be ingested (taken in by mouth) as they can be toxic.

Popular aromatic plant oils

A few of the popular aromatic plant oils and their uses for the following symptoms include:

- peppermint – digestive disorders
- rosemary – muscular pains, mental stimulant
- sandalwood – depression, anxiety and nervous tension
- sweet orange – depression and anxiety
- tea tree – respiratory problems, antifungal, antibacterial and antiviral
- lavender – headaches, insomnia, burns, aches and pains.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Qualified aromatherapy practitioner
- International Federation of Aromatherapists information line Tel. (02) 9715 6622
- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Victorian Poisons Information Centre Tel. 13 11 26 – seven days a week, 24 hours a day – for advice about poisonings, suspected poisonings, bites and stings, mistakes with medicines and poisoning prevention advice.

Things to remember

- Aromatherapy is the use of aromatic plant oils to bring about physiological and emotional changes.
- Aromatic plant oils should never be swallowed or applied undiluted to the skin.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Department of Health and Human Services - RHP&R - Office of the Chief Health Officer

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2019 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.