

Is All the Hype About Aromatherapy and Essential Oils True?



First, let's make sure that you understand the true definition of aromatherapy. Holistic aromatherapy is the practice of using volatile plant oils, including essential oils, for psychological and physical well-being. Holistic aromatherapy does not include the use of fragrance oils or other synthetic products.

In the United States, no laws exist governing the use of the term *aromatherapy*, so any manufacturer, even those that include synthetic ingredients, can slap the word *aromatherapy* onto their label. And unfortunately, a number of companies do just that. Some even go so far as to hype unfounded claims. A majority of consumers mistakenly think that candles made using paraffin wax

and fragrance oils (both emit toxins when burned) and a number of other toxic products that smell nice are suitable for aromatherapy.

Some journalists, manufacturers and retailers even refer to aromatherapy as a "new discovery" thus giving the illusion that aromatherapy may be a new fad. Journalists also routinely misrepresent the field of holistic aromatherapy and fill their fluff pieces with buzzwords like "cure."

Below are a few common questions and answers that will help clarify what aromatherapy can and can't do.

Can aromatherapy cure my major illness or psychological problem?

If you expect that aromatherapy alone will cure a major illness or permanently "cure" "stress," you will likely be in for a disappointment. But if you develop a realistic mindset and expect that aromatherapy may *help* with a physical condition, may help with symptoms, may affect your mood, or help alleviate or temporarily eliminate stress or other psychological factors, you should be delighted with the overall results that you experience by incorporating aromatherapy into your lifestyle.

Holistic aromatherapy is a complementary alternative health modality. Aromatherapy is not intended to replace standard medical care, but is meant to complement it. In some cases, under the guidance of a qualified practitioner, aromatherapy can offer an alternative choice to taking prescription or over-the-counter drugs. Aromatherapy can offer practical benefit for a variety of common ailments or symptoms such as assisting with cuts, wounds, bruises, inflammation, arthritis, muscle stiffness, indigestion, acne, skincare, haircare, hygiene, PMS, menstruation, and for providing mental and emotional assistance with such issues as stress, fatigue, anxiety, insomnia, fear and enhancing concentration.

Aromatherapy does have valid and extraordinary uses. It can improve one's lifestyle tremendously, especially if you take the time to become educated about each essential oil, its chemistry, safety and applications. But, as with anything in life, sensibility comes into play. Do not fall prey to any claims that aromatherapy can cure major illnesses or can cause miracles to happen. Aromatherapy can play a beneficial role in *assisting* with illnesses, but it should not be depended upon as a cure.

Is there any actual "science" behind the use of essential oils?

Essential oils are comprised of an array of naturally occurring constituents like esters, oxides, alcohols, phenols and aldehydes. Without giving you a full lesson in chemistry, let's use Roman Chamomile Essential Oil and Lavender Essential Oil as quick examples. Lavender Essential Oil contains 40% linalyl acetate and Roman Chamomile Essential

Oil contains 35% isobutyl angelate. Both linalyl acetate and isobutyl angelate are esters. Esters are said to offer noteworthy anti-inflammatory and sedative properties. Both oils are common ingredients in aromatherapy products and recipes intended for relaxation and insomnia. Some essential oils, by way of the natural chemical constituents they contain, are said to be naturally anti-bacterial or antiviral. All essential oils possess their own unique combination of constituents that make particular oils naturally well suited for one application or another.

Not all essential oils, however, are safe to use in holistic aromatherapy no matter how "nice" (or "not-so-nice") they smell. Mugwort and Wormwood Essential Oils, for example, are generally avoided and considered hazardous oils within the field of holistic aromatherapy because they contain significant concentrations of ketones including thujone. Thujone is reported to potentially cause convulsions and liver damage. [Robert Tisserand and Tony Balacs, *Essential Oil Safety* (United Kingdom: Churchill Livingstone, 1995), 199.] Of course, method of usage can play a part, but it's more sensible to stick with using essential oils that are generally regarded to be safer.

Now, having said that, there are other uses for essential oils that aren't provable by science. The spiritual application of essential oils is a primary example.

Why is aromatherapy gaining so much press and exposure now if it's been in practice for thousands of years?

The use of infused oils and essential oils (once distillation was developed) has been in existence for thousands of years. The actual term *aromatherapy*, however, was only introduced earlier in the 20th century. The surge in the popularity of aromatherapy seems to be threefold:

(1) Society today is more health conscious and is now more receptive to natural alternative health modalities including aromatherapy. The media, although often inaccurately, has been actively covering the trends in increased health awareness and alternative medicine. The media has made a point to include the *aromatherapy* "buzzword."

(2) The Internet has made it easier for individuals to access and share aromatherapy information. The ability to network and purchase essential oils online has had a positive effect on the growth of aromatherapy and aromatherapy businesses.

(3) Lifestyles of today are now more hectic and stressful. Since aromatherapy can assist in reducing the symptoms of stress and help one energize or relax, society is taking notice. If you go to stores that sell any kind of candles, bath or beauty products, you'll most likely see products labeled with the word "aromatherapy." In my personal experience, most times I see the word "aromatherapy" on products not sold by reputable aromatherapy retailers, the word is used incorrectly. So, the surge in awareness of aromatherapy is both positive and negative. Unfortunately, there is a lot of *misinformation* about aromatherapy and *mislabeled* products around.

Some companies claim that for best results, I should use essential oils on my skin at full strength or take them internally. Others claim I should never use essential oils on my skin at full strength. Which is it?

While some essential oils are safe for skin at full strength, others are not. Additionally, each individual is different in how they react to each oil. Essential can be extremely irritating in full concentration. Some can even cause permanent sensitization when used at full strength. Only apply oils at full strength when advised to do so by a trained aromatherapist or medical professional

Essential oils are concentrated liquids and are very powerful substances. They should not be consumed internally without counsel from a trained aromatherapist or medical professional.