

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy uses the healing properties of essential oils, which are extracted from plants, to improve health and help prevent illness.

Essential oils can be used in different ways, including massage (most commonly used method), baths, inhalation (not if you have asthma) and creams and lotions.

Different oils are thought to affect the body in different ways. For instance, they can be calming, relaxing, uplifting or energising. Some oils are believed to have properties which fight infections. Tea tree oil, for example, is used as an antiseptic or to relieve fungal infections such as thrush.

Aromatherapy is used for a wide range of problems, including pain relief; anxiety and stress related conditions; insomnia; headaches, arthritis; rheumatism and menstrual problems. It is sometimes available in maternity services and is widely used in palliative and cancer care in hospitals and hospices.

Research indicates that aromatherapy massage may be helpful for the short-term relief of anxiety and that certain essential oils may relieve some symptoms associated with dementia. There is some promising evidence that tea tree oil could be useful in treating acne and fungal infections.

What will happen when I see an aroma therapist?

A session normally lasts from around 45 to 90 minutes. The aroma therapist will ask questions about your medical history, general health and lifestyle and will then choose a blend of oils, and a way of applying them, specifically for your needs. The essential oils are concentrated, so for massage treatment they are diluted with vegetable-based oil.

During a massage, the aroma therapist will massage the blend into your body using either a full-body massage or massage of particular areas as agreed with you, while you lie on a therapy couch. If lying down is difficult for you, you can be massaged in another position. The practitioner will cover the parts of your body they are not working on with towels.

The massage section will tell you more about how massage is practised. The practitioner may also suggest ways in which you can use aromatherapy at home, such as in the bath, or by using an oil burner, and will recommend which oils are best for your present condition.

For some health problems, the aroma therapist may advise having a course of treatment, so that the benefits build up over time.

What precautions should I take?

Essential oils could be harmful if not used properly. They should always be diluted in a vegetable-based oil before being used on the skin and they should not be swallowed or used internally. Your aroma therapist will explain this to you if they suggest that you use the oils at home. Like all medicines, essential oils should be kept out of reach of children.

Essential oils must never be swallowed or used internally. If using essential oils at home, avoid putting them on damaged skin, such as burns or dermatitis.

Make sure you tell your practitioner if you have heart problems, high blood pressure, asthma, diabetes, epilepsy or a skin irritation, as some aromatherapy oils should be avoided for people with these conditions.

It is thought that some essential oils could interact with particular prescribed medicines, including antibiotics, antihistamines, anticoagulants and tranquillisers, making their effects stronger or weaker. It is important, therefore, to check with your GP or pharmacist and the aroma therapist if you are taking any other medication.

Certain oils, such as orange, lemon and bergamot, may make your skin more sensitive to light so you might get sunburnt more easily. If you have had these oils on your skin, you should not expose it to direct sunlight, sun beds or sunlamps afterwards.

There is a possibility that some essential oils might be carcinogenic. They include basil and fennel, which are widely used and other oils which are not generally used in normal practice.

There may be interactions between some aromatherapy oils and homeopathic remedies, so tell your aroma therapist if you are also seeing a homeopath.

Pregnant women are advised to consult an aroma therapist and their midwife or GP before using any essential oils. It is generally advised that essential oils are not used in the first 14-16 weeks of pregnancy and some oils should not be used at all during pregnancy.