

# Aromatherapy in general practice

Mary Dalglish considers the use of essential oils in maintaining the wellbeing of patients

**A**romatherapy is the practice of using volatile oils – usually called essential oils – to promote wellbeing. Essential oils are the pure ‘essences’ found in flowers, berries, grasses, roots, seeds, bark, fruit and herbs, and are extracted mainly by distillation. Some oils, such as citrus oils, are expressed (squeezed from the rind) and some are extracted using solvents (alcohol or carbon dioxide).

## Unique character

All oils have their own unique character, aroma and therapeutic properties and as they are highly concentrated, a little goes a long way. Sunlight, heat and oxygen cause the oils to deteriorate, so essential oils should be stored in dark glass bottles in a cool, dark place.

One of the earliest aromatic formulas was an ancient Egyptian mixture of sixteen aromatics known as kyphi, which contained myrrh, juniper, cinnamon, spikenard, frankincense, saffron and cassia, amongst others. It was used in temples, burned in the home, used as a perfume for the body and clothes and also as a medicine to aid sleep and anxiety.

## Treatment

After welcoming the client, the therapist explains what is involved in the treatment and carries out a consultation to determine their state of health as well as dietary and lifestyle factors, which may influence this. In some cases it may be necessary to refer the client to their medical practitioner before going ahead with treatment, for instance, if they have a serious medical condition. After the massage, the therapist usually offers some advice to help maintain the

effects of the treatment and may supply an aromatherapy blend that can be used at home between treatments.

## The benefits

Aromatherapy has many benefits, including a general feeling of wellbeing through massage and the use of essential oils. Many research studies on the benefits of essential oils have been carried out and these can be accessed on various websites, including PubMed (visit [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/) and enter the word ‘aromatherapy’). Below are some health conditions that may benefit.

- **Stress** is now regarded as one of the major causes of ill health, with work related stress, depression and anxiety figuring high. Studies done on aromatherapy and stress show that aroma inhalation could be a very effective stress management method for high school students (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19571632>). In a series of five experiments, the effects of essential oil inhalation via an aroma stick showed consistent and large psychological and physiological effects. (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25787105>)
- **Pain** brings many problems to older people, including physical and psychological dysfunctions. A study to examine the effectiveness of an aromatherapy programme for older people with chronic pain demonstrated that aromatherapy can be an effective tool to reduce pain, depression, anxiety, and stress levels among community-dwelling older adults. (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4119713/>)

The results of a Korean study suggest that aromatherapy massage may improve



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**menopausal symptoms** including hot flushes, depression and pain. (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2529395/>)

• **Infection control** can be a huge challenge, especially MRSA in hospitals. Certain antimicrobial essential oils such as tea tree, manuka and thyme have been scientifically proven to be effective against this serious infection. (Maggie Tisserand, 2015)

• **Sleep disorders** affect many people and can be particularly distressing for postpartum women. A study carried out at Zanjan University of Medical Sciences in Iran indicates that lavender can have beneficial effects on sleep and can be suggested as a non-pharmacological method for the improvement of the maternal health:

(<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4443384/> ). Another study shows that the quality of sleep in ischemic heart disease patients was significantly improved after aromatherapy with lavender oil. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3203283/>

## Cautions

Essential oils have wonderful therapeutic properties but the following common sense precautions should be observed in their use since they are highly concentrated. Pregnant women should seek advice from a qualified aromatherapist before using essential oils and, for children over the age of three, essential oils are always used in lower concentrations (1%).

### *Finding an aromatherapist*

Aromatherapists are not statutory regulated. However, if looking for a therapist offering aromatherapy, you may wish to signpost patients to an Accredited Register (AR) – such as the FHT Complementary Healthcare Therapist Register. This register has been independently approved by the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care, a body accountable to parliament. The FHT's Register currently lists more than 10,000 practitioners, throughout the UK, offering up to 19 different complementary therapies, including body massage. [www.fht.org.uk/register](http://www.fht.org.uk/register)

• For references, please email [jbissett@georgewarman.co.uk](mailto:jbissett@georgewarman.co.uk)

## *How it works*

Essential oils enter the body in three ways:

### 1. Skin application

The skin is permeable to the active chemical molecules in essential oils, which are absorbed in a similar way to the ingredients in pharmaceuticals such as hormone replacement therapy cream and nicotine patches. Massage and heat both increase circulation and can enhance absorption. Some researchers report that essential oils may be more readily absorbed from skin locations with greater concentrations of sweat glands and hair follicles. (Battaglia, 2003). Up to 10% of a diluted essential oil is absorbed through the skin and enters the bloodstream. (Tisserand & Young 2013)

### 2. Inhalation

When we inhale through the nose, airborne molecules interact with the olfactory organs (sense of smell) and almost immediately with the brain via the olfactory nerve. This pathway is directly connected to the limbic system of the brain that deals with emotions.

The limbic system is directly connected to those parts of the brain that control heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, memory, stress levels, and hormone balance (Higley & Higley, 1998). Molecules inhaled through the nose or mouth are also carried to the lungs and interact with the respiratory system.

### 3. Ingestion

Essential oils naturally occur in many foods such as nuts, fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices and some are also added to foods as flavourings, with the essential oil being completely mixed and blended into the food. Ingestion of essential oils is NOT recommended for the general public because a great deal of knowledge and expertise is necessary for safe practice. Some essential oils can be toxic to the liver or kidneys when ingested and the chemical breakdown of essential oils during digestion can change their effects. There could also be potentially harmful drug interactions for those on medication (Tisserand & Young, 2013).