

# Wintergreen Oil: More Than Just a Pain Reliever

If you've ever used a pain-relieving ointment or rub with a mentholated aroma, then chances are you already know what wintergreen oil smells like. The clean and minty scent of this herbal oil is associated with relieving pain and stimulating mental wellbeing. Discover more interesting facts about wintergreen oil in this article.

## What Is Wintergreen Oil?

Wintergreen oil is extracted from a shrubby evergreen plant called *Gaultheria procumbens*, which is from the Ericaceae plant family. Wintergreen is native to North America, mainly in Northeast United States and Canada. This low-growing shrub thrives best in rich, organic soils in shady locations, such as on mountains and forests in cool, moist regions.<sup>1</sup>

Wintergreen is characterized by its long stem, oval and glossy green leaves, and white blooms, which turn into handsome and edible bright red berries that birds and other wildlife feast on.<sup>2</sup> The leaves are used to make wintergreen essential oil.

Wintergreen oil has a sweet and fresh scent, similar to mint. It's very pungent, but not unpleasant. It has a pale yellow or pinkish yellow color.<sup>3</sup>

## Uses of Wintergreen Oil

Wintergreen's medicinal uses have been widely known for many centuries, particularly by the Native Americans, who used the leaves to treat respiratory tract infections.<sup>4</sup> They also chewed the leaves to increase endurance and respiratory capacity, helping them run long distances.<sup>5</sup> Native tribes such as Ojibwes and Mohawks also drank wintergreen tea as a healthful medicinal beverage.<sup>6</sup>

Today, dilutions of wintergreen extract are popularly used as a food flavoring, and it's also added to gums and toothpaste for its minty flavor. In some cases, its strong scent can also work as a deodorizer to mask foul odors.

Wintergreen oil is still used medicinally today, but take note: it is NOT advisable to use the pure (concentrated) essential oil, as it can be very toxic. Instead, you should dilute a very small amount in a safe carrier oil, such as coconut oil or olive oil.

Diluted wintergreen oil can be applied topically or diffused via a vaporizer. It's popularly used for treating or relieving certain health conditions. It's most renowned as a pain reliever for muscular or skeletal problems. In fact, it is usually added to liniments and topical pain relievers, helping ease muscle and/or joint pain.<sup>7</sup>

When used aromatherapeutically (diffused, vaporized, or added to a steaming bowl of hot water), wintergreen oil helps relax and uplift your mood. It has powerful, mentally stimulating effects that increase your attentiveness and the vibration of your body.<sup>8</sup> Its strong aroma can also open, influence, and elevate the awareness of your senses, particularly your sensory system.<sup>9</sup>

## Composition of Wintergreen Oil

Wintergreen oil is mostly made up of methyl salicylate (85 to 99 percent), which accounts for almost all the healing and health-promoting properties of this essential oil. It also contains 3,7 guaiadiene, a-pinene, myrcene, delta 3-carene, limonene, and delta-cadinene. Wintergreen oil is almost similar to birch essential oil in terms of its chemical makeup.<sup>10</sup>

## Benefits of Wintergreen Oil

Wintergreen oil is said to have analgesic, antirheumatic and antiarthritic, antispasmodic, antiseptic, aromatic, and astringent properties. It also acts as a carminative, diuretic, and emenagogue.

Here are some health benefits of wintergreen oil:<sup>11,12</sup>

- **Pain relief** - The most popular health benefit of wintergreen oil is its pain-relieving effects, which can help alleviate headache, muscle cramps, joint pain, tendonitis, and bone pain. Wintergreen oil also helps drive out stress and tension.
- **Relief for rheumatism and arthritis** – Wintergreen oil stimulates blood circulation around the affected tissues and muscles, helping clear blood obstructions, which is one of the major causes of these two conditions. It also reaches the bloodstream, where it helps stimulate and increase urination, speeding up the removal of uric acid and other toxins. This can reduce the effects of rheumatism.
- **Helps prevent infections** – Wintergreen oil can be fatal to bacteria (such as *Staphylococcus aureus*), protozoa, and fungi. However, it is not advisable to take the oil orally to fight infections in the internal organs, nor is it recommended to be used on open wounds.
- **Promotes skin and hair health.** Wintergreen oil is said to help tone the skin and prevent acne (if used in a very diluted form). It also prevents dandruff and tones the hair roots, which helps prevent hair fall.

## How to Make Wintergreen Oil

Wintergreen oil is extracted from the leaves of the plant. The leaves are macerated in warm water, encouraging the enzymes to produce methyl salicylate. Once this is done, steam distillation is used to separate the methyl salicylate, resulting in an ester – an organic acid mixed with alcohol.<sup>13</sup>

However, be warned that pure wintergreen oil (which is a highly concentrate form of methyl salicylate) is highly toxic even in small amounts, so I do not recommend experimenting and making your own infusion at home. Instead, look for a product that has been diluted in other organic carrier oils. Many manufacturers use synthetics instead of natural methyl salicylate for their wintergreen oil, so make sure you choose a product made with pure, natural wintergreen oil.

## How Does Wintergreen Oil Work?

Wintergreen oil is said to have cortisone-like effects that can help relieve pain quickly. Once you apply it on the affected area, it gets absorbed by your skin rapidly. The methyl salicylate in the oil helps numb the area and promotes blood circulation, providing a warm sensation to your body. This relieves pain and gives your body comfort. Wintergreen oil can penetrate further in your body, where it provides more health benefits.[14](#)

## **Is Wintergreen Oil Safe?**

Despite its usefulness as a pain reliever, I advise you to be very careful when using wintergreen oil. Methyl salicylate is extremely toxic.[15](#) DO NOT ingest this essential oil, even diluted preparations of it. Use it in moderation, whether topically or vaporized, and diluted with a safe carrier oil.

If you have a child at home, it is very important that you keep wintergreen oil out of their reach at all times. Toddlers often become tempted to ingest it because of its pleasant smell, which could be fatal. In fact, ingesting a single teaspoon of wintergreen oil is equivalent to taking almost 90 baby aspirins, and can lead to death.[16](#) According to the Oregon State University website, just 10 milliliters can be fatal for a child, while 30 milliliters can kill an adult.[17](#)

I advise you to do a skin patch test to check for sensitivity before using this essential oil. Simply apply a small amount on your arm and see if any allergic reactions occur.

Wintergreen oil is also not recommended for small children, pregnant women, nursing moms, and epileptics.[18](#) If you have an allergy to aspirin, you should also refrain from using this oil, as they have the same components.

## **Side Effects of Wintergreen Oil**

The methyl salicylate in wintergreen oil may cause certain allergic reactions, such as hives, difficulty breathing, and swelling of the face, tongue, lips, or throat. It may also cause pain, severe burning, and blistering of the skin.[19](#) If ingested, wintergreen oil may lead to severe liver and/or kidney organ damage.[20](#)