

# Aromatherapy and Essential Oils - A Patient's Guide

**Key words...aromatherapy and essential oils**

## What is Aromatherapy?

Walk into a chemist in any town today and, along with familiar items such as shampoo and cotton buds, you are likely to find a bewildering array of little brown bottles containing small amounts of essential oil, each claiming to have their own specific therapeutic qualities, some will help you to relax, some help to stimulate, some improve the appetite, and some improving stiff joints.

The principle of aromatherapy involves the use of one or more of these essential oils, which are extracted from the root, stem, flower or any other part of a plant, to treat individual or collective ailments. The oils can be absorbed by the body in the form of massage, compresses, skin creams, by bathing or saunas or by inhalation in the form of burners, sprays, and candles.

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## Aromatherapy History

The practise of using these oils to balance the mind and body goes back many thousands of years. Ancient Chinese, Egyptian and Indian civilisations are known to have used oils extensively and, as the centuries progressed, the use of oils in the perfume industry grew steadily. The wonderfully effective march of orthodox medicine over the past hundred years meant the effects and benefits of essential oils were generally forgotten in the West, becoming the preserve of the *hippy dippy* culture.

However, over the last few years there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in these misunderstood yet powerful natural remedies. As a society we are perhaps becoming less and less willing to pop pills hoping our problems go away, lots more of us are seeing our own difficulties in a more holistic light, that's to say we are becoming much more aware of the whole picture, mind body and spirit.

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## What Happens in a Typical Aromatherapy Session?

When visiting a qualified aromatherapist, the chances are you'll be visiting for a massage. The first session is likely to take between one and a half to two hours and the therapist will sit down with you and take a detailed medical consultation helping them to understand your past and current medical history. The aromatherapist would probably take particular interest in how you feel on the day, what aches and pains

you have, whether you are happy, sad, lively or lethargic and what you want to achieve during the session.

A blend of essential oils will be discussed and these oils will be mixed with base or carrier oil such as sweet almond oil, wheat germ or grape seed. This blend will be specific for you and your condition on that day. If you go to see the same aromatherapist regularly they might decide to subtly change the blend each time you visit.

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The therapist would generally leave the room to wash their hands whilst you climb up onto a couch and cover yourself with a large towel or two. Aromatherapy massage differs from the more conventional Swedish or sports style in that there is very little deep muscle work, because the blend of oils should do the work for the therapist. Instead, it's likely to be slow, soft and rhythmic. The body absorbs the essential oils and they start to work, relaxing the muscles, stimulating the mind, improving appetite and so on. The therapist will generally take your lead as to whether to talk during the session; some clients like to chat and others prefer peace and quiet or a little light music. The room is likely to be calm, warm and dark, helping to relax and sooth. The actual massage might take up to an hour and a half; at the end the therapist would leave the room to wash enabling the client to dress.

On returning the aromatherapist is likely to offer some advice for the next twenty four hours - helping the client to get the very best from the treatment. Longer term advice tends to begin after a few sessions, as the therapist and client begin to establish trust and rapport. Professional treatments rarely stop once you leave the clinic, most good therapists will offer advice on longer term preventative steps the clients could take to improve their quality of life.

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##### **Who can Benefit from Aromatherapy?**

I am often asked "who aromatherapy is suitable for?" In my experience this would be most people!

There are of course certain conditions where essential oils are not recommended. One of the worrying aspects of the wide availability of essential oils is that these cautions are often brushed aside. For example, some oils are particularly unhelpful for epileptics, people on specific medications, those with sensitive skin, those with blood pressure difficulties, heart conditions, or kidney damage. Many essential oils should be avoided totally during pregnancy..

The adage "*if in doubt leave it out*" seems to be very appropriate for aromatherapy!  
The alternative seems to be visiting a qualified professional aromatherapist and getting the job done right first time!

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