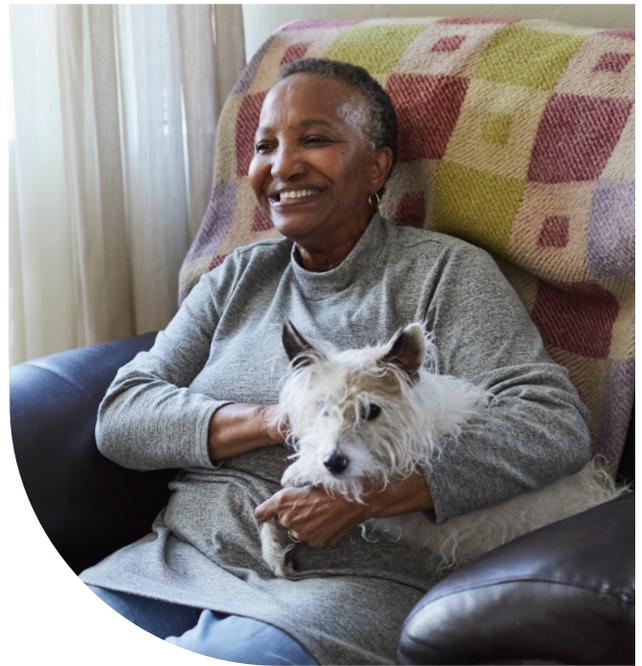


Using essential oils for health benefits



You may have heard of essential oils. You may even be using them in hopes of improving your physical and mental health. However, what exactly are essential oils, and can they actually boost your mood and make you healthier?

All about essential oils¹

Essential oils are compounds extracted from plants. They are made from the fragrant part in many plants, often found beneath the surface of leaves, bark or peel. Different methods are used to turn these fragrant parts into oils, but generally, when the plant is crushed or steamed with a steam distillation process, the fragrance is released.

Once the fragrance has been extracted, it is combined with a “carrier oil” to create a product that’s ready to use.

Sometimes, essential oils are used as therapy to improve physical, mental or spiritual well-being; this is called aromatherapy. Aromatherapy is a type of complementary and alternative medicine therapy.

Types of essential oils

There are many different types of essential oils available. It would be impossible to talk about each one. However, some of the most common oils include:

- Chamomile
- Lavender
- Peppermint
- Rosemary
- Bergamot
- Eucalyptus
- Lemon
- Rose
- Tea tree
- Sandalwood

All essential oils retain the natural smell and flavor of their original plant source. Each essential oil has its own unique makeup of chemicals; this affects the way it smells, how it is absorbed and its effects on the body.²

Notes

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How essential oils are used

Essential oils are taken or given as aromatherapy in a few different ways:

- **Inhalation.** This is when a person breathes in essential oils by using a room diffuser, which spreads the essential oil through the air. It can also be done by placing drops of an essential oil on a tissue or cotton ball nearby, or by a method called steam inhalation.¹
- **Applied directly to the skin.** This is when one or more essential oils are diluted into a carrier oil and massaged into the skin. Essential oils may also be mixed with lotions, soaps, candles or bath salts.¹
- **Ingestion.** Some manufacturers sell essential oils that can be taken internally, but this practice is controversial because research on its safety is limited.³

Note: Please talk to your healthcare provider prior to using essential oils.

How do essential oils work?^{4,5}

Aromatherapy is primarily thought to work by stimulating smell receptors in the nose. These smell receptors then send messages (via the nervous system) to the limbic system.

Your limbic system, which contains the hippocampus and amygdala, is the part of your brain that controls emotions, behaviors, sense of smell (the olfactory structures) and the formation of long-term memories. In part, the limbic system is responsible for familiar smells triggering particular memories or emotions.

When essential oils are applied to the skin, they are absorbed into the bloodstream, similar to other common treatments like nicotine patches or hormone replacement creams.

Health benefits of essential oils

Although many people use essential oils for health benefits, here's what the research says about their effectiveness.

Stress, anxiety and depression

Many people use essential oils to help with stress, anxiety and depression. Research shows that aromatherapy may help anxiety and depression symptoms.^{6,7} Despite this research, more high-quality studies are needed.

Remember: Anxiety and depression should be treated by a healthcare professional.

Sleep and insomnia

Sleep disturbances affect your physical, mental and emotional health and well-being. Can essential oils help improve sleep? More studies are needed, but preliminary research suggests that essential oils may have a positive effect on sleep,⁸ possibly increasing sleep quality.⁹

Note: Practicing good sleep hygiene habits may also help improve sleep.

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Pain and inflammation

Many people are searching for natural ways to fight pain. Here's what the research says about using essential oils for pain and inflammation:

- A recent review found that aromatherapy had a noteworthy positive effect in reducing pain.¹⁰
- Additional studies have found that applying essential oils to the skin may be effective in relieving arthritis pain,¹¹ neck pain¹² and headaches.¹³
- Essential oils may help reduce IBS symptoms, too.¹⁴

Remember: Pain and inflammation should be managed under the care of your healthcare team.

Immune health

Your immune system is your body's first line of defense against foreign invaders like germs and viruses. Can essential oils help boost it?

Essential oils may be able to help fight bacteria, fungi and viruses.¹⁵ However, studies do not prove that essential oils can treat infection.

Remember: Take antibiotics as prescribed by your healthcare provider.



Other uses of essential oils

Essential oils aren't only used for aromatherapy and health benefits; they may serve many other purposes.

Some people use essential oils for the following:

- To make their homes smell better
- As a mosquito repellent
- For DIY home cleaning solutions
- For skin care (e.g. face wash, lotions, body sprays, etc.)
- In cooking and baking

Safety of essential oils

Most essential oils are safe and free of harmful side effects when used properly, but it's important to pay attention to factors like:¹⁶

- **Dosage.** If used in the wrong doses or too high of a concentration, some essential oils may contribute to tumor development and other harmful changes in the body. In general, the overall recommendation is to dilute your oils with some sort of carrier oil if applying them to your skin.
- **Purity.** Sometimes essential oils are mixed with other essential oils, synthetic chemicals or vegetable oil.

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Using essential oils for health benefits

- **Application method.** An essential oil that is safe when applied in one way may not be safe when applied in another way. Be sure you understand the application method of any essential oil you're using, and don't ingest oils without the guidance of a healthcare professional.
- **Drug interactions.** Negative interactions between essential oils and pharmaceutical drugs may be possible. Discuss essential oil use with your healthcare provider to evaluate potential risks and benefits.

Follow these general safety recommendations for using essential oils

- Research each oil you plan to use by reading about it in books or looking it up on a reliable online resource.
- Be cautious and don't overdo it.
- Follow recommendations for diluting the oil.
- Work with your healthcare provider.

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