Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy is one of the most popular forms of complementary therapy. One of the reasons it has been so successful is due to its holistic approach. When planning, the aromatherapist will consider an individual's medical history. General mental health, well-being and emotional condition are also taken on board before starting.

Plant oils and herbs have been used for medicinal purposes for thousands of years. Yet the word aromatherapy appears to have only originated in 1928. A French chemist, René-Maurice Gattefossé accidentally burnt his hand. On reaction, Gattefossé plunged his hand into the nearby vat of lavender oil. This reflex saw the burn heal quickly. He was left with no scar and prompted him to investigate the oil further.

How does it work?

Aromatherapy works in two different ways: through sense of smell and through skin absorption.

Many essential oils contain anti-inflammatory properties. These are often applied to the skin to fight infection or relieve pain. However, if you are in pain or suspect an infection, it is important to consult your general practitioner before turning to aromatherapy.

Another way aromatherapy is used is through inhalation or smelling essential oils. Our sense of smell is directly linked to the brain, which is why we react in different ways to each scent. When the brain receives a smell, it sets off a reaction in the body. This is where you may feel hunger, energized or relaxed. The nerves in our nose can also recognize smells and link them with a memory, which is why certain scents can make you feel happy or sad.

Aromatherapy is now recognized in the science world and is listed on The NHS Directory of Complementary and Alternative Practitioners. It has gained steam in palliative care and is increasingly used alongside conventional treatment. Research into its effectiveness is encouraging and continues to grow.

What are the benefits of Aromatherapy?

Aromatherapy can be used to help treat various symptoms and conditions. The evidence for its effectiveness varies and often further research is required. The therapeutic qualities of the oils are thought to soothe, uplift, restore, boost the immune system and encourage positivity.

The symptoms and conditions aromatherapy is thought to help include:

- Stress - Certain scents can trigger a relaxation response in the brain. When combined with a massage, it can help to reduce feelings of stress. It is important to discover the cause of your stress to ensure long-term management.
- Anxiety - Studies have found that aromatherapy can have a positive effect on those suffering with anxiety. As a complementary therapy, it is best used with other therapies such as talking therapy.
- Insomnia - Many people find aromatherapy a helpful aid for sleep. Burning a relaxing scent in your home or adding essential oils to a warm evening bath can help prepare your body and mind for sleep.
- Dementia - The interest in the effects of aromatherapy for conditions such as dementia continues to grow. Research into the therapy revealed many benefits and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) suggests it may help treat feelings of agitation in those with dementia.
- Chronic pain - Aromatherapy is thought to be especially helpful for easing any chronic pain-related anxiety. If the pain is muscular, a massage using essential oils may be an effective treatment. **As with any new therapy, please consult your general practitioner before starting.**
- Cancer - Aromatherapy may help to reduce pain and anxiety for those with cancer in the short-term. According to Cancer Research UK, many people with cancer turn to aromatherapy. It appears to make patients feel happier and more able to cope with the changes happening.
- Palliative care - Aromatherapy massage is becoming increasingly popular in palliative care. The combination of scent and massage is thought to help patients feel less affected by the symptoms and side effects of their illness.

Different ways to use Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy essential oils have many uses. This includes aromatherapy massage, through personal inhalers, room diffusers and bathing oils.

If you have asthma or suffer from other respiratory conditions, please consult your general practitioner first.

- Added into bath water – Many people like to add essential oils to a warm bath to promote a more relaxing soak. If you want to add essential oils to your bath, please consult a professional aromatherapist first. A professional will advise you on which oils are safe.

- Steamed – This is a common treatment to ease feelings of congestion. Simply add a few drops of your chosen essential oil to a bowl filled with hot water and inhale the steam.
- Burned – Burning essential oils through an oil burner is becoming increasingly popular. The oil is placed on a shallow surface, above a candle. The heat of the candle slowly burns the oil, encouraging the scent to fill the room.
- Inhaled – A great way to get a quick boost from your chosen essential oil is to have a small vile at your desk. This way you can directly inhale your oils and reap the benefits, even on the move!
- Sprayed onto fabric – An enjoyable, easy way to bring aromatherapy into your home is to add some essential oils to a room spray. You can spray them on furniture, bed linens or pillows to add a relaxing, comforting scent. To ensure the mixture won't stain or damage the fabrics, be sure to consult an aromatherapist.

What to expect

During the initial consultation, the aromatherapist will get to know you. It is common for them to ask you about your lifestyle. They will ask about your general health and well-being, your medical history and the reason you are considering aromatherapy. Once you have discussed the reasons and your desired outcome, the aromatherapist will suggest a treatment plan.

The aromatherapist will discuss the available oils and the properties they hold. Together you will choose the essential oils that will be most effective in managing your symptoms.

Is it safe?

Provided they are used correctly, essential oils are safe to use. The oils should never be swallowed or massaged into broken skin. If you suffer irritation, please contact your general practitioner. Some people may suffer an allergic reaction. Be sure to tell the aromatherapist if you suffer from any allergies or are prone to skin sensitivity so they can take necessary precautions.

Elderly people, children and pregnant women are advised to seek medical advice before trying aromatherapy. There are also some instances where the oils may interfere with prescribed medication. Do inform your aromatherapist of any medications you are taking during the initial consultation.

There are hundreds of different aromatherapy oils, all of which have different benefits. Most work best in groups called synergy blends because their combined effect is

greater than their separate effects. Sometimes allergies, or just dislike of an oil, are causes to either create an individualized custom blend, or even just a single oil.

To my knowledge none of the oils I use have any interference with prescribed medication. Please ask a pharmacist if you have any concerns about interactions.

Aromatherapy massage

One of the most popular ways to use aromatherapy is through a massage. The essential oils are added to a carrier oil to dilute the mixture and are then massaged into the skin. An aromatherapy massage usually lasts at least one hour. This will be tailored to suit your specific requirements. Aromatherapy massages can be incredibly relaxing. They give you the opportunity to reap the benefits of both aromatherapy and massage.

Which include:

- Psychological benefits
- Can help to lift mood (physical touch boosts our happy hormones, you should leave feeling uplifted).
- Promotes relaxation, reducing stress and improving your sense of well-being.
- Reduces nervous tension (our bodies hold a lot of psychological tension, so releasing this can be helpful).
- Physical benefits
- Stimulates the body's immune system, protecting itself from illness.
- Eases muscle tension (making you feel more relaxed and soothing aching muscles).
- Encourages lymphatic drainage, helping to reduce fluid and toxin build-up.
- Boosts circulation (helping blood and oxygen circulate the body to promote healing).