

Rose water: Benefits, uses, and side effects

Aromatherapy, or essential oil therapy, refers to a range of traditional, alternative or complementary therapies that use essential oils and other aromatic plant compounds.

Essential oils have been used for nearly 6,000 years, with the aim of improving a person's health or mood.

The National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy (NAHA) [defines](#) aromatherapy as “the therapeutic application or the medicinal use of aromatic substances (essential oils) for holistic healing.”

In 1997, the International Standards Organization (ISO) [defined](#) [Trusted Source](#) an essential oil as a “product obtained from vegetable raw material, either by distillation with water or steam, or from the epicarp of citrus fruits by a mechanical process, or by dry distillation.”

A range of essential oils have been [found](#) to have various degrees of [antimicrobial](#) activity and are believed to have antiviral, nematocidal, antifungal, insecticidal, and [antioxidant](#) properties. Aromatherapy applications include massage, topical applications, and inhalation.

However, users should be aware that “natural” products are also chemicals, and they can be hazardous if used in the wrong way. It is important to follow the advice of a trained professional when using essential oils.

Aromatherapy is normally used through inhalation or as a topical application.

Inhalation: the oils evaporate into the air using a diffuser container, spray, or oil droplets, or breathed in, for example, in a steam bath.

Apart from providing a pleasant smell, aromatherapy oils can provide respiratory disinfection, decongestant, and psychological benefits.

Inhaling essential oils [stimulates](#) the olfactory system, the part of the brain connected to smell, including the nose and the brain.

Molecules that enter the nose or mouth pass to the lungs, and from there, to other parts of the body.

As the molecules reach the brain, they affect limbic system, which is linked to the emotions, the heart rate, [blood pressure](#), breathing, memory, [stress](#), and hormone balance. In this way, essential oils can have a subtle, yet holistic effect on the body.

Topical applications: massage oils, and bath and skin care products are [absorbed](#) through the skin. Massaging the area where the oil is to be applied can boost circulation and increase absorption. Some argue that areas that are richer in sweat glands and hair follicles, such as the head or the palms of the hand, may absorb the oils more effectively.

Essential oils are never applied directly to the skin. They must always be diluted with a carrier oil. Usually, a few drops of essential oil to an ounce of carrier oil is the concentration. Most common carrier oils are

sweet almond oil or olive oil.

To do an allergy test:

- Dilute the essential oil in a carrier oil at twice the concentration you plan to use
- Rub the mixture into an area the size of a quarter on the inside of the forearm

If there is no allergic response within [24 to 48 hours](#), it should be safe to use.

Some people report developing allergies to essential oils after using them many times before. If a new allergic response appears, the individual should stop using it immediately and avoid its smell.

To achieve a 0.5 to 1 percent dilution, use 3 to 6 drops of essential oil per ounce of carrier. For a 5 percent dilution, add 30 drops to one ounce of carrier.

A maximum concentration of [5 percent](#) is generally considered safe for adults.

Ingesting, or swallowing, essential oils is not recommended. Taken by mouth, the oils can damage the liver or kidneys.

They [can also lead to](#) interactions with other drugs, and they can undergo unexpected changes while in the gut.

Aromatherapy is a complementary therapy. It does not provide a cure for diseases, rashes or illnesses, but it can support conventional treatment of various conditions.

It has been shown to reduce:

- Nausea
- Pain and body aches
- [Anxiety](#), agitation, stress, and [depression](#)
- [Fatigue](#) and [insomnia](#)
- Muscular aches
- [Headaches](#)
- Circulatory problems
- Menstrual problems
- Menopausal problems
- Alopecia, or [hair loss](#)

Some types of [psoriasis](#) may find relief with aromatherapy, but a healthcare professional should advise about use and application.

Digestive problems may benefit from peppermint oil, but it should not be ingested.

Tooth ache and mouth sores can be relieved by clove oil, but this, too, should only be applied topically and not swallowed.

Supporters claim that these and a wide range of other complaints respond well to aromatherapy, but [not all of the uses](#) are supported by scientific evidence.

Different oils have different uses and effects.

- **Basil** essential oil is used to sharpen concentration and alleviate some of the symptoms of depression. It may relieve headaches and [migraines](#). It should be

avoided during pregnancy.

- **Bergamot** essential oil is said to be useful for the urinary tract and digestive tract. When combined with eucalyptus oil it may help relieve skin problems, including those caused by stress and [chicken pox](#).
- **Black pepper** essential oil is commonly used for stimulating the circulation, muscular aches and pains, and bruises. Combined with [ginger](#) essential oil, it is used to reduce [arthritis](#) pain and improve flexibility.
- **Chamomile** essential oil [can treat eczema](#)
- **Citronella** essential oil is a relative of lemongrass and acts as an insect repellent
- **Clove** essential oil is a topical analgesic, or painkiller, that is commonly used for toothache. It is also used as an antispasmodic antiemetic, for preventing vomiting and nausea, and as a carminative, preventing gas in the gut. It has [antimicrobial](#), [antioxidant](#) and [antifungal](#) properties.
- **Eucalyptus** essential oil can help relieve the airways during a cold or [flu](#). It is often combined with peppermint. Many people are allergic to eucalyptus, so care should be taken.
- **Geranium** essential oil can be [used for Trusted Source](#) skin problems, to reduce stress, and as a mosquito repellent.
- **Jasmine** essential oil has been described as an aphrodisiac. While scientific evidence is lacking, research has shown that the odor of jasmine increases beta waves, which are linked to alertness. As a stimulant, it might [increase](#) penile blood flow.
- **Lavender** essential oil is used as an antiseptic for minor cuts and burns and to enhance relaxation and sleep. It is said to relieve headache and migraine symptoms.
- **Lemon** essential oil is said to [improve mood Trusted Source](#), and to help relieve the symptoms of stress and depression.
- **Rosemary** essential oil may [promote](#) hair growth, boost memory, prevent muscle spasms, and support the circulatory and nervous systems.
- **Sandalwood** essential oil is believed by some to have aphrodisiac qualities.
- **Tea tree** essential oil is [said to have Trusted Source](#) antimicrobial, antiseptic, and disinfectant qualities. It is commonly used in shampoos and skin care products, to treat [acne](#), burns, and bites. It features in mouth rinses but it should never be swallowed, as it is toxic.
- **Thyme** essential oil is said to help reduce fatigue, nervousness, and stress.
- **Yarrow** essential oil is used to treat symptoms of cold and flu, and to help reduce joint [inflammation](#).

Oil for a massage will be mixed with a “carrier oil” that dilutes the oil and provides lubrication.

The aromatherapist should take a thorough medical history, and a lifestyle, diet, and current health history.

Aromatherapy involves a holistic approach, so it aims to treat the whole person. Treatments will be suited to the individual’s physical and mental needs. Based on these needs, the aromatherapist may recommend a single oil or a blend.

Depending on patient needs and preferences, the practitioner may recommend a single oil or a blend.

According to the National Cancer Institute (NCI), aromatherapy products [do not need Trusted Source](#) FDA approval as long as there is no claim that they treat a

specific disease.

An aromatherapist is not the same as a massage therapist, although a massage therapist may use aromatherapy oils.

Each essential oil has its own chemical makeup and reason for use, so it is important to speak with a trained aromatherapist, nurse, doctor, physical therapist, massage therapist or pharmacist before applying or using an oil for healing purposes.

A trained professional can recommend and teach how to use each product, giving proper instructions on application or dilution.

Consumers should also be aware that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration does not monitor aromatherapy products, so it can be difficult to know whether or not a product is pure or if it is contaminated or synthetic.

Some beauty and household products, such as lotions, make-up, and candles [contain products](#) that may appear to be essential oils, but they are really synthetic fragrances.

Like medications, essential oils must be treated with respect. It is important to seek professional advice and to follow instructions carefully.

Caution when using essential oils

Since essential oils cause reactions in the body, not all the oils will benefit everyone. Chemical compounds in essential oils can produce adverse effects when combined with medications. They may reduce the effectiveness of conventional drugs, or they may exacerbate health conditions in the individual.

A person with [high blood pressure](#), for example, should avoid stimulants, such as rosemary. Some compounds, such as fennel, aniseed, and sage act similarly to [estrogen](#), so a person with an estrogen-dependent breast or ovarian [tumor](#) should avoid these.

Concentrated products may be poisonous before dilution and should be handled with care. A maximum concentration of 5 percent is recommended.

Some oils produce toxins which can cause damage to the liver, kidneys, and nervous system, especially if taken internally. Swallowing essential oils can be hazardous, and fatal in some cases.

Individuals with any of the following conditions should be extra careful when using aromatherapy:

- An allergy, or allergies
- [Hay fever](#), a type of allergy
- [Asthma](#)
- Skin conditions such as eczema or psoriasis

People with the following conditions must be extremely cautious:

- [Epilepsy](#)
- [Hypertension](#), or high blood pressure

If the oil is to be mixed with a carrier, the individual should tell the aromatherapist or massage therapist about any nut allergies, because carrier oils are often obtained from nuts and seeds.

Aromatherapy can have side effects, but these are normally mild and do not last long.

They include:

- Nausea
- Headaches
- Some allergic reactions

Use of aromatherapy by pregnant or nursing mothers has not been proven safe by research, so it is not recommended.

During the first trimester of pregnancy, aromatherapy may pose a risk to the developing fetus. Women who are breastfeeding should avoid peppermint essential oil, as it may be expressed in breast milk.

Essential oils derived from citrus may make the skin more sensitive to ultraviolet light, increasing the risk of [sunburn](#).

Some oils may affect the function of conventional medicines, so people who are using medications of any type should first check with a qualified pharmacist or doctor.

Finally, when [storing Trusted Source](#) essential oils, it is important to be aware that light, heat, and oxygen can affect the integrity of the oil. Products should come from a respected and trustworthy source, to be sure of the quality. Following instructions carefully reduces the risk of compromising the user's health.

In parts of Western Europe aromatherapy is incorporated into mainstream medicine as an antiseptic, antiviral, antifungal and antibacterial therapy. In the United States and Canada, this is less so. In France, some essential oils are regulated as prescription drugs, and they can only be administered or prescribed by a doctor.

Aromatherapy can help alleviate some conditions, but it should be used correctly, under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. The NAHA can advise on aromatherapists in your area, and some are members of a professional association, but until now there are no licensing boards for aromatherapists in the U.S.