

New Connections

HELPING YOU CARE FOR A LOVED ONE DURING TREATMENT



Issue 15



Aromatherapy:

An easy treatment
that could help your
loved one relax
and feel better

Aromatherapy, or aroma medicine, is increasingly popular as a complementary therapy for people with cancer – to relieve symptoms or side effects, ease pain, and enhance life during treatment.

There are many potentially beneficial uses of aromatherapy. However, as with any complementary therapy, it's always important to discuss its use with a doctor before trying it. Relying on this type of treatment alone, and avoiding or delaying conventional medical care for cancer, may have serious health consequences.

What is aromatherapy?

Aromatherapy is the use of fragrant substances, or essential oils, distilled from plants. These substances are either inhaled or applied to the skin to alter mood or improve health. Approximately 40 essential oils are common in aromatherapy; among the most popular are lavender, rosemary, eucalyptus, chamomile, marjoram, jasmine, peppermint, lemon, ylang ylang, and geranium.

What are the benefits of aromatherapy?

Aromatherapy proponents promote the products as a natural way to help people with cancer cope with chronic pain, nausea, depression, and stress, and to produce a feeling of well-being. There is some evidence suggesting this may be true. However, proponents also claim aromatherapy can help relieve bacterial infections; stimulate the immune system; fight colds, flu and sore throats; improve urine production; increase circulation; and cure cystitis, herpes simplex, acne, headaches, indigestion, PMS, muscle tension, and even cancer. The available scientific evidence does not support these further claims.

How does it work?

There are different ideas as to how aromatherapy may work.

Scent receptors in the nose send chemical messages through the olfactory nerve to the brain's limbic region, which influences emotional responses, heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration. Some say it is these connections that explain aromatherapy's positive effects.

Others say the oils are absorbed directly into the system through the skin. Laboratory studies suggest that the oils can affect organ function, although it is not yet clear whether this can be useful.

How is it administered?

Aromatherapy is either self-applied or administered by a practitioner or caregiver. Many aroma therapists in the United States are trained as massage therapists, psychologists, social workers, or chiropractors, and use the oils as part of their practices.

The essential oils can be used one at a time or in combination, and may be inhaled or applied to the skin. For inhalation, a few drops of the essential oil are placed in steaming water, atomizers, or humidifiers that spread the mist/oil combination throughout the room. Sometimes the oils are placed in a heatproof dish over a candle or other flame to diffuse the scent.

Essential oils can be applied to the skin during massage, or they can be added to bathwater. For application to the skin, the oils are combined with a carrier, usually vegetable oil. Oils may also be made into salves, creams, and compresses. Some people also apply drops of certain essential oils to their pillows.

Does aromatherapy work?

Current scientific evidence does not support any claims that aromatherapy is effective in preventing or treating cancer, but it may be used to enhance quality of life. Early clinical trials suggest aromatherapy may have some benefit as a complementary treatment in reducing anxiety, stress, pain, nausea, and depression. However, some of the studies show no difference in outcome between massage with aromatherapy oils and massage without them.

There are also reports that inhaled peppermint, ginger, and cardamom oil seem to relieve the nausea caused by chemotherapy and radiation. However, these claims are not supported by the available scientific evidence.

Clinical research on aromatherapy is in its infancy, but early trials do suggest that aromatherapy may help people better cope with cancer.

Are there any possible problems or complications?

Aromatherapy is generally safe. However, essential oils usually should not be taken internally, as many of them are poisonous. Some oils can also cause sensitization (allergy to the oil). Still others may cause irritation if applied undiluted to the skin. And in some people, aromatherapy oils have been reported to cause headaches and nausea.

For a more complete discussion of aromatherapy, including its history, please click [here](#).

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