

WHAT ARE ESSENTIAL OILS AND DO THEY WORK?

by Helen West, RD

Essential oils are often used in aromatherapy, which is a form of alternative medicine. Essential oils are compounds extracted from plants. The oils capture the plant's scent and flavor, also called its "essence." Unique aromatic compounds give each essential oil its characteristic essence. Essential oils are obtained through distillation or mechanical methods, such as cold pressing. Once the aromatic chemicals have been extracted, they are combined with a carrier oil to create a product that's ready for use. The way the oils are made is important, as essential oils obtained through chemical processes are not considered true essential oils.

How Do Essential Oils Work?

Essential oils are most commonly used in the practice of aromatherapy. They are either inhaled, or diluted then rubbed on the skin. The chemicals in essential oils can interact with your body in a number of ways. When applied to your skin, some plant chemicals are absorbed.

It's thought that certain methods can improve absorption, such as applying to different areas of the body. Inhaling the aromas from essential oils can stimulate areas of your limbic system, which is a part of your brain that plays a role in emotions, behaviors, sense of smell and long-term memory.

Health Benefits of Essential Oils

Despite their widespread use, little is known about the effectiveness of essential oils in treating health conditions.

Here's a look at the evidence for some of the common health problems that essential oils and aromatherapy have been used to treat.

Stress, Anxiety and Depression

It has been estimated that 43% of people who have stress and anxiety use some form of alternative therapy to help with their condition. Regarding aromatherapy, initial studies have been quite positive. Many have shown that the smell of some essential oils can work as a complementary therapy to treat anxiety and stress.

Headaches and Migraines

In the '90s, two small studies found that dabbing a peppermint oil and ethanol mixture on participants' foreheads and temples relieved headache pain.

Recent studies have also found positive effects against headaches when applying peppermint and lavender oil to the skin. It has also been suggested that applying a mixture of chamomile and sesame oil to the temples may effectively treat headaches and migraines. This is a traditional Persian headache remedy.