

Information on aromatherapy



This evidence based information sheet aims to provide clearly sourced and reliable information to help you make informed choices about the services that we offer. You may tell us how useful you have found this using the feedback forms provided. If you'd like more information on how to access the range of services we provide, please contact the helpline at the end of this information sheet.

Penny Brohn Cancer Care Opinion

We support this therapy and include it as part of the Bristol Approach <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	We support this therapy, but do not offer it as part of the Bristol Approach <input type="checkbox"/>	We do not support this therapy <input type="checkbox"/>
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In brief

Aromatherapy is a gentle therapy that uses natural essential oils to promote emotional and physical health and wellbeing. Oils can be inhaled or applied to the skin when diluted, often through massage. For people with cancer, aromatherapy is offered to relieve the symptoms of cancer and its treatments. People report feeling relaxed, pampered and empowered by aromatherapy massage. The balance of research evidence is supportive of aromatherapy as an effective treatment for anxiety, and there is limited positive evidence for improving sleep. There is evidence both for and against the benefits of aromatherapy for pain, depression, physical symptoms, mood and quality of life. Whilst more research is needed, Penny Brohn Cancer Care supports aromatherapy as a safe and potentially beneficial therapy for people with cancer when practiced by a qualified and experienced therapist.

Practitioner Perspective

"Aromatherapy can provide a powerful combination of the caring touch of massage and the use of pure natural essential oils through two primal senses, touch and smell. We at Penny Brohn Cancer Care believe that aromatherapy can help people physically, mentally and emotionally to find harmony, balance and to experience a profound sense of well-being. The safe effective use of essential oils in the home can easily be adopted to form part of a self-help programme. This means that Aromatherapy's positive effects can be immediate and rapid as well as long lasting. Aromatherapy with bodywork (massage) can help restore natural energy reserves, strengthen the immune system, encourage deep relaxation and help the client cope with some of the symptoms of cancer as well as its treatments."

More information: What is aromatherapy?

Aromatherapy is the use of essential oils to promote wellness and health. Aromatic plant materials have been used in rituals and medicine since ancient times and modern aromatherapy continues this tradition. It is thought plant oils were prepared by mashing or steeping in oil before the process of distillation was developed by Avicenna, an Arabic physician in the 10th century to distil essential oil of rose¹. In Europe, distilled oils were used by medieval apothecaries, and relied upon from the 19th century for their antiseptic properties.

The term "aromatherapy" was first used in the 1920s by French chemist René Maurice Gattefossé. Whilst working in his lab, Gattefossé burned his arm and plunged it into the nearest liquid which happened to be lavender oil. He noticed that the pain was relieved and the wound healed remarkably well. He went on to research plant oils in more depth and published his work in a book with the name "Aromatherapie" in 1937². Inspired by Gattefossé, Jean Valnet used oils to treat psychiatric disorders and as antiseptics to treat the wounded in World War II.

At around the same time an Austrian nurse, Marguerite Maury, used essential oils cosmetically and for their effects on mood and emotion. She re-kindled the traditional use of massage to apply the oils and encouraged the practice of blending a tailored selection of oils for each person. Her book, "The Secret of Life and Youth"³ and her teachings in the UK influenced modern aromatherapy. In 1977, Robert Tisserand published another key textbook "The Art of Aromatherapy"⁴. His work was influenced by the work of Gattefossé and Valnet, and has also helped shape today's modern practice of Aromatherapy.

What happens in an aromatherapy session?

Aromatherapy sessions are usually 60 or 90 minutes long. The therapist will ask you a few questions about your medical history and lifestyle to help them to select appropriate essential oils. In a very few cases, your aromatherapist may want to consult with your GP before starting treatment. They will talk to you about this first.

Aromatherapy can be administered in different ways

- Inhalation. Oils can be vaporised in an oil burner, added to a hot bath or to a bowl of hot water, and then breathed in.
- To the skin, when diluted. Oils are blended with carrier oil, added into a lotion, or used in a compress.

The most common way for aromatherapy to be applied to the skin is by massage. You will be asked to lie on a massage couch or sit in a massage chair. As it involves direct contact with the skin, you will need to remove some clothing. The therapist will give you privacy to do this, and will often use towels or sheets to cover areas of the body not being treated. The massage itself will vary according to the practitioner but may well include common techniques such as kneading and stroking. Some therapists play gentle music during the session to aid relaxation.

To get the most out of the session, it is advisable to have some quiet time afterwards, and some therapists recommend that the oils should be left on for 6-8 hours for them to be fully absorbed. At the end of a session, the therapist may give the client a blend of oils to use at home.

What are the providers' claims?

Aromatherapy aims to treat the causes as well as the symptoms of a disease or problem, and looks at the person as a whole. Different oils are said to have different properties which may affect emotion, or act like medicines such as anaesthetics or antiseptics. Aromatherapists do not claim to be able to cure cancer, but work to relieve physical symptoms, and to help their clients cope with the emotional effects of cancer and its treatments.

There are different theories about how aromatherapy works:

- Oils are thought to work in the same way as standard medicines. By inhaling them or applying them to the skin, they are absorbed into the body where they act on organs or tissues⁵.
- Essential oils are thought to stimulate a part of the brain called the limbic system⁵ via the sense of smell. The limbic system is linked to memories, mood states and stress levels. Aromatherapy is thought to promote emotional balance and good physical health through this system.
- The energetic level. Essential oils are thought to capture the energetic makeup of a plant, and have an effect which goes beyond their pharmacological properties. Essential oils made artificially are not thought to be as effective as oils extracted from the plant itself for this reason¹.

Whilst the first two modes of action are based on sound scientific principles, the clinical relevance of these actions has not yet been well researched⁵.

What do people who have had aromatherapy say about it?

There are two qualitative studies that report what people say about aromatherapy. In both studies people are very positive. Benefits reported include relaxation, empowerment, a chance to talk and enjoyment.

Research studies known as qualitative studies ask people about their experiences. They can tell us what having a therapy was like for the people involved in the study, but can't tell us if a therapy is likely to work for everyone (this is dealt with in the section "What's the evidence?"). A full list of references used to write this section is available by request.

Are there any legal issues?

There are no laws which regulate aromatherapy, so therapists do not have to be registered to practice. Therapists may choose to register with one of the two federal regulatory bodies that have recently been set up. Registration is voluntary so lack of registration does not mean your therapist is not qualified. There are a number of trustworthy qualifications that aromatherapists can hold. You can check if your therapist's qualification meets a good standard by contacting The Aromatherapy Council or visiting their website. Please see the section "other sources of information" at the end of this sheet.

How much does it cost?

Sessions tend to cost between £30 to £60 depending on the length of time of the treatment and the location.

What's the evidence?

The balance of research evidence is supportive of aromatherapy as an effective treatment for anxiety, and there are positive results from a single study for sleep. There is some positive evidence about the efficacy of aromatherapy for pain, depression, physical symptoms, mood and quality of life, but some other studies did

not detect an effect. More high quality research is needed to better understand the benefits of aromatherapy for people with cancer.

This is a summary of our research findings. A full list of reference used to write this section is available upon request.

Is aromatherapy safe?

Aromatherapy is considered safe when practiced by a qualified therapist who has experience of working with people living with cancer.

However, essential oils should not be used undiluted on skin, and should not be taken internally. Tell your therapist about any medicines you are on as some essential oils may interact with some drugs^{5,6}. If you are pregnant or trying to get pregnant, breastfeeding, have epileptic fits, asthma, or kidney disease⁷, tell your therapist before your first treatment. Reports of adverse effects are unusual, but have included allergy, dermatitis and phototoxic reactions⁸.

Resources used

A full list of references used to write this sheet, including the research literature, is available upon request. Please call the helpline.

1. Battaglia, S. The complete guide to aromatherapy. Second edition. The International Centre of Holistic Aromatherapy. 2003.
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3. Maury, M. Le Capital Jeunesse. 1961 (in French). Published in English as Marguerite Maury's guide to aromatherapy; The secret of life and youth. The C.W. Daneil Company Limited, Great Britain. 1964.
4. Tisserand RB. The Art of Aromatherapy. Healing Arts Press. 1977
5. Ernst E, Pittler MH, Wider B, editors. The desktop guide to complementary and alternative medicine. An evidence-based approach. 2nd Edition. Mosby Elsevier; 2006.
6. Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database. Aromatherapy [monograph on the internet]. Accessed February 2008 from (login needed): [http://www.naturaldatabase.com/\(\\$2znaepri2jeuts45s2tta245\)/nd/Search.aspx?cs=&s=ND&pt=100&id=1174&ds=&name=AROMATHERAPY](http://www.naturaldatabase.com/($2znaepri2jeuts45s2tta245)/nd/Search.aspx?cs=&s=ND&pt=100&id=1174&ds=&name=AROMATHERAPY)
7. Cancer Research UK. Aromatherapy [monograph on the internet]. Updated September 2007, accessed November 2007 from www.cancerhelp.org.uk/help/default.asp?page=247
8. Collinge W, Lee D, Markowitz J, Ulbricht C, Weissner W. Aromatherapy [monograph on the internet]. Natural Standard Database. 2007. Accessed November 2007 from (log-in needed) www.naturalstandard.com/monographs/monoframeset.asp?monograph=/monographs/alternativemodalities/aromatherapy.asp%3Fprintversion%3Dtrue

Other sources of information

Other organisations who offer information on complementary therapies:

- Foundation for Integrated Health. Web: <http://www.fih.org.uk>
- NHS National Library for Health. Web: <http://www.library.nhs.uk/cam>

Organisations that offer support and information for people with cancer:

- Cancer Research UK. Tel: 0207 009 8820, web: www.cancerresearchuk.org
- NHS Direct. Tel: 08 45 46 47, web: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
- Cancerbackup. Tel: 0808 800 1234, web: www.cancerbackup.org.uk
- Macmillan CancerLine. Tel: 0808 808 2020, web: www.macmillan.org.uk

National organisations that represent the therapy:

- The Aromatherapy Council. Web: www.aromatherapycouncil.co.uk
- The General Regulatory Council for Complementary Therapists. Tel: 0870 3144031, web: www.grcct.org
- Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council. Tel: 0203 178 2199, web: www.cnhc.org.uk

Statement

Our information and research is designed to help you make informed choices about the services that we provide. From time to time, for illustrative purposes, we may make reference to commonly available products (such as relaxation CDs and popular self-help books). We do not endorse or advertise the use of any specific product.

If you have any questions please contact us

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