PROCEDURE

Essential oils therapy

Essential oils therapy uses inhaled or diluted plant oils to support comfort and symptom relief.

PURPOSE
Support comfort or symptom relief alongside standard care

PROCEDURE TYPE
Therapeutic, bedside inhalation or topical application

WHERE IT IS DONE
Outpatient clinic, hospital bedside, spa, or home

ANAESTHESIA
None

HOW LONG IT TAKES
Several minutes to one hour, based on delivery method

PREPARATION
Review allergies, medicines, pregnancy, and planned skin exposure

RECOVERY
Immediate; avoid driving after headache, dizziness, or sedating treatment

MAIN RISKS
Skin irritation, allergy, breathing symptoms, poisoning if swallowed

RESULTS
During or soon after treatment, based on symptom response

Overview

Essential oils therapy, also called aromatherapy, uses concentrated plant extracts for their scent or for application to the skin. The oils may be inhaled from a diffuser, inhaler stick, cloth, or steam device. They may also be diluted in a carrier oil and used during massage.

Essential oils therapy is a complementary treatment. This means it may be used alongside medical care, not as a replacement for treatment of an illness. It is most often intended to improve comfort, relaxation, or a symptom such as nausea or pain.

Research results are mixed. Some studies report short-term benefits for certain symptoms, but studies often use different oils, methods, and outcome measures. There is no single standard aromatherapy procedure or treatment course.

Essential oils are highly concentrated. "Natural" does not mean risk-free. Swallowing them is not a routine part of aromatherapy and can cause poisoning.

Why the procedure is performed

A healthcare facility may offer essential oils therapy to support comfort during an illness, procedure, or hospital stay. People also seek it through massage therapy, wellness services, or supervised home programs.

It may be used as an additional option for:

The expected goal should be clear before treatment. For example, the goal might be to feel less nauseated during an infusion rather than to treat the condition requiring the infusion.

Aromatherapy should not delay an assessment of new, persistent, or worsening symptoms.

- Stress, tension, or difficulty relaxing
- Nausea, including nausea related to some treatments
- Short-term discomfort or pain
- Sleep difficulties
- Distress associated with medical care

Who should and should not have it

Essential oils therapy may be reasonable if you want a complementary approach, understand that benefits are uncertain, and can use the product safely. It may be more appropriate when a trained practitioner knows your health history and the other treatments you receive.

Treatment may need to be avoided, changed, or delayed if you have:

Infants and young children are more vulnerable to accidental poisoning and may react differently to certain oils. Aromatherapy for a child should be planned by someone with appropriate pediatric knowledge, and oils must be stored out of reach.

Some citrus oils can make skin more sensitive to sunlight. Topical treatment may need to be avoided if sun or ultraviolet exposure cannot be limited afterward.

- A previous allergy or skin reaction to an essential oil, fragrance, or plant
- Asthma or another condition in which scents trigger coughing or breathing trouble
- Migraine, nausea, or headaches triggered by strong smells

- Broken, burned, infected, or inflamed skin where an oil would be applied
- Pregnancy or breastfeeding, because safety information is limited for many oils
- A planned treatment or medicine that could interact with the product
- Difficulty using the oil without swallowing it or getting it in your eyes

How to prepare

The treating facility's own instructions take priority over general information in this article. Preparation is usually simple, but it should match the oil and delivery method being used.

Tell the practitioner about allergies, asthma, scent-triggered symptoms, skin conditions, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and all medicines or supplements you use. Bring the name or ingredient list of any product you plan to supply yourself.

Do not stop prescribed medicine for aromatherapy. Ask whether you should avoid perfume, scented lotion, or essential oils before the session. If an oil will be placed on your skin, the practitioner may assess your skin and use a properly diluted preparation. A small-area skin test may sometimes be considered.

Fasting is not normally needed. However, follow separate fasting or medicine instructions if aromatherapy is being offered during another procedure.

Keep oils in their original containers. Do not transfer them to food or drink containers, where they could be swallowed by mistake.

What happens during the procedure

Before treatment, the practitioner should explain the intended goal, the oil being used, how it will be given, and what evidence supports its use. You should be able to decline a scent you find unpleasant.

For inhaled therapy, a small amount of essential oil may be placed in a personal inhaler, diffuser, or nearby material. You breathe normally while the scent is present. A shared-space diffuser may not be suitable in hospitals or clinics because other people can be sensitive to fragrances.

For topical therapy, a diluted oil may be applied to a limited area of skin or used during massage. Essential oils are commonly mixed with a carrier oil because concentrated products can irritate or injure the skin.

You remain awake and can ask for treatment to stop at any time. Tell the practitioner immediately if you notice burning, itching, coughing, dizziness, nausea, headache, or breathing discomfort.

Essential oils should not be put in your eyes or injected. Swallowing an oil should occur only under specific medical direction; it is not part of routine aromatherapy.

Recovery and what to expect afterward

Aromatherapy itself should not cause pain. Mild skin tenderness can follow massage, but burning, increasing pain, or marked itching is not expected. Wash off a topical product and contact the treating team if irritation develops.

You can usually eat and drink normally afterward unless another treatment requires restrictions. Do not taste or swallow leftover oil.

Most people can return to normal activity right away. Follow any sunlight precautions given after a topical citrus-based product.

You can generally drive after aromatherapy alone. Do not drive if you feel dizzy, drowsy, unwell, or distracted by a headache. If aromatherapy was combined with sedation, strong pain medicine, or another procedure, that procedure's driving restriction applies.

Most people can return to work the same day. You may need more time if the session was part of treatment for another health condition.

Risks and possible complications

The main risks come from skin exposure, inhalation, accidental swallowing, and incorrect product use.

Possible problems include:

Product strength and purity are not always consistent. A product sold for fragrance or cosmetic use has not necessarily been tested as a medical treatment.

Risk can be reduced by using a clearly labelled product, following dilution and storage instructions, avoiding ingestion, and stopping treatment when symptoms occur. More oil is not necessarily more effective.

- Irritation, burning, or allergic contact dermatitis, which is an itchy skin reaction
- Headache, nausea, coughing, wheezing, or worsening scent sensitivity

- Eye or mouth irritation after accidental contact
- Increased sun sensitivity from certain oils applied to the skin
- Poisoning after swallowing an oil, particularly in children
- Interactions between an oil and a medicine

Results and follow up

There is no laboratory or imaging result from aromatherapy. The result is based on whether the symptom or comfort goal changes.

You may notice relaxation or a change in nausea or discomfort during the session or soon afterward. No response is also possible. A longer course has no universal schedule because products and treatment goals differ.

It can help to record the oil, delivery method, symptom being treated, response, and any unwanted effects. Routine follow-up is appropriate if aromatherapy is part of a broader care plan. If it is not helping, discuss whether to stop rather than allowing it to replace treatment with stronger evidence.

Alternatives

Choosing not to have essential oils therapy is reasonable. The best alternative is based on the symptom you hope to address.

Unscented massage offers touch and muscle relaxation without fragrance exposure. It may still cause temporary soreness and may not be suitable over injured skin.

Breathing exercises, mindfulness, music, or guided imagery avoid essential-oil reactions. They require time and practice, and their effects differ between people.

Standard symptom treatments may be more predictable. Examples include anti-nausea medicine, pain treatment, sleep-focused care, counselling, or physical therapy. These options may have their own side effects, costs, or time commitments, but they are often supported by more condition-specific evidence.

Doing nothing may be reasonable for a mild, short-lived symptom. It trades away a possible comfort benefit and may not be suitable when a symptom is persistent, worsening, or affecting daily life.

When to call your healthcare team

Contact your healthcare team during routine hours if you develop a mild but persistent rash, headache, nausea, cough, or other unwanted effect after treatment. Also call if the symptom being addressed is worsening or is not improving as expected.

Seek urgent medical advice for widespread hives, significant skin blistering, persistent vomiting, or new wheezing.

Call emergency services for trouble breathing, swelling of the face or throat, fainting, a seizure, or severe confusion.

If anyone swallows an essential oil, contact your local poison centre promptly rather than waiting for symptoms. In the United States, Poison Control is available at 1-800-222-1222 . Call emergency services if the person is unconscious, having a seizure, or having difficulty breathing.

Common questions

Will I be asleep?

No. Aromatherapy does not require anaesthesia or sedation. You remain awake unless it is being used alongside a different procedure that includes sedation.

Can I drive home?

Usually, yes. Do not drive if you develop dizziness, drowsiness, headache, or nausea, or if another treatment included sedating medicine.

How painful is it?

Inhaled aromatherapy should not hurt. Massage may cause mild pressure or short-term tenderness. Burning, stinging, or increasing skin pain means the product should be removed.

When will I know if it worked?

A short-term change in comfort may be noticeable during the session or soon afterward. There is no test result, and some people notice no benefit.

Can I swallow essential oils?

Not as part of routine aromatherapy. Even small amounts of some oils can cause poisoning. Use them by mouth only when specifically directed and supervised by a qualified healthcare professional.

Are essential oils safe because they are natural?

Not automatically. Concentrated plant chemicals can irritate skin, trigger allergies, affect breathing, interact with medicines, or cause poisoning if swallowed.

Sources

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