



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Aromatherapy

This information describes the common uses of Aromatherapy, how it works, and its possible side effects.

Tell your healthcare providers about any dietary supplements you're taking, such as herbs, vitamins, minerals, and natural or home remedies. This will help them manage your care and keep you safe.

What is it?

By way of the sense of smell, aromatherapy may communicate to parts of the brain that produce certain chemicals like serotonin and dopamine, which may have calming effects or reduce pain. Aromatherapy can also trigger pleasant memories, or patients may have positive expectations that increase benefits.

In addition, some essential oils have certain properties that suggest specific uses. For instance, [lavender](#) has shown effects on both anxiety and sleep, but effects on sleep are noticed more at higher dose levels. [Ginger](#) is

commonly used for nausea, but a few studies in cancer patients did not find ginger aromatherapy helpful for chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, although it may help to stimulate saliva flow and appetite.

In the case of aromatherapy massage, there is also the added environment that may include [music](#), calm surroundings, and a soothing therapist. All of these components may work together to reduce symptoms.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

Anxiety

A large hospital study suggests that aromatherapy using lavender or sweet marjoram may help anxiety. Another study in cancer patients found those who were anxious felt more relaxed and less stressed with the use of an aroma inhaler. However, a large trial of aromatherapy during radiation treatments did not show benefits on anxiety. Aromatherapy massage was preferred to cognitive behavior therapy, and had similar benefits on distress in cancer patients.

Depression

In a large trial, benefits that lasted for up to 2 weeks after aromatherapy massage were noted among cancer patients.

Nausea

A large hospital study suggests that ginger aromatherapy may help reduce nausea. In addition, a study in cancer patients found nearly half of nauseous patients experienced relief with fragrance delivered through aroma inhalers. However, aromatherapy did not appear to help nausea caused by chemotherapy in hospitalized children or breast cancer patients, even though it did improve appetite and overall health scores.

Sleep problems

In a study that looked at the records of acute care cancer patients, aromatherapy improved sleep in patients. Smaller studies suggest aroma massage may help hospice patients with sleep problems.

Fatigue

Because aromatherapy may help improve sleep, it may also reduce symptoms of fatigue, but studies specifically addressing fatigue have been mixed.

Pain

A large hospital study suggests aromatherapy using sweet marjoram may improve pain.

Saliva flow and appetite

In a study of breast cancer patients, ginger aromatherapy improved appetite loss. In thyroid cancer patients, lemon

and ginger aromatherapy appeared to increase saliva flow. These results need to be confirmed in larger studies before they can be recommended

What else do I need to know?

What Is It:

Aromatherapy uses the scent of concentrated plant oils, known as essential oils, to improve feelings of well-being. It is a popular complementary therapy used to relieve stress and produce other pleasant sensations. Aromatherapy is also practiced in some hospitals to relieve symptoms that are caused by disease or its treatment. Examples of these types of symptoms include nausea, fatigue, anxiety, and sleep problems. Practitioners are often nurses or massage therapists who have had additional training to work with cancer patients and others who require special care.

The most common forms of aromatherapy include the use of diffusers or devices to inhale the scent of essential oils. Several hospitals have established programs and note improvements in patient-reported pain, anxiety, nausea, and other symptoms. For example, sweet marjoram may improve pain, while lavender may help reduce anxiety. Among cancer patients, [lavender](#) is commonly used to treat anxiety or sleep problems, while [ginger](#) is used to treat nausea. However, a few studies did not find ginger

aromatherapy helpful for nausea or vomiting caused by chemotherapy, although it appears to improve appetite. A study in thyroid cancer patients found a certain aromatherapy combination may increase saliva flow, but this needs to be confirmed in future trials.

Some studies show benefit with aromatherapy as part of [therapeutic massage](#), and in one large trial cancer patients had benefits in anxiety or depression for up to 2 weeks afterwards. Aromatherapy massage was also preferred over cognitive behavior therapy, and had the same benefits on distress in cancer patients. Other studies suggest aroma massage may help hospice patients, particularly with sleep problems. However, large scientific reviews found most studies of aromatherapy massage too small or of poor quality to be reliable. Also, it is not clear whether benefits reported are actually from the use of aroma, massage, or both.

Overall, current research suggests that aromatherapy is popular among patients to address symptoms such as poor sleep, pain, nausea, and anxiety. It is also thought to be a safe and low-cost non-drug approach.

Is It Safe:

Overall, aromatherapy is thought to be a safe and low-cost non-drug approach to help address symptoms such as

poor sleep, pain, nausea, and anxiety. However, some products containing essential oils may have adverse effects.

Case reports

Skins rashes, sores, blisters, or abnormal skin reaction to sunlight or ultraviolet rays: With exposure to lavender, bergamot, and other types of essential oils. Massage therapists who use aromatherapy often in massage sessions may develop skin rashes or sensitivity to essential oils.

Other reactions upon skin contact: Ylang-ylang, lemongrass, jasmine, sandalwood, and clove oils are known to cause skin sensitivity in some individuals.

Mouth sores: Have occurred with the use of peppermint oil.

Breast enlargement: Repeated application to the skin with products containing lavender and tea tree oils caused abnormal breast growth in pre-teen boys.

Infection and fatalities due to product contamination: In 4 cases of exposure to an imported aromatherapy room spray, 2 of which led to death. Although the product was recalled, it raises awareness of potential risks with products from areas where the bacteria is common.

Who Can Provide this Service:

Practitioners of aromatherapy in a hospital setting are usually highly trained professionals, such as nurses or massage therapists who have experience working with patients who may have special needs. They can provide aromatherapy safely to avoid side effects in patients with complicated medical histories.

Where Can I Get Treatment:

Many major cancer centers offer [integrative medicine therapies](#) that include some forms of aromatherapy treatment, either alone or as a component of aromatherapy massage. Other hospitals are also beginning to incorporate aromatherapy in acute care settings, but this area is still relatively new and may not be used as standard supportive care.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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