Dear Alice,

Does aromatherapy actually work or is it just a myth?

Answer

Dear Reader,

No one really "nose" if aromatherapy works, but the practice of using essential oils to treat illness and alter mood has existed for over 5,000 years. While there is a fair amount of research on aromatherapy with essential oils and their uses, the findings are mixed as to their effectiveness. Whether aromatherapy causes a real physiological response or simply works by power of the mind (i.e., the placebo effect) remains to be seen.

Aromatherapy, also known as essential oil therapy, uses aromatic oils derived from plant parts such as roots, bark, or leaves. Since essential oils are very concentrated, they can be expensive. For example, it takes 220 pounds of lavender flowers to produce just one pound of lavender essential oil. Essential oils may be combined with lotion for a body massage, added to warm bath water, or inhaled via a room spray or incense. It’s thought that they work by stimulating smell receptors in the nose which send signals to the parts of the brain that control emotion. Some essential oils, such as lavender, are said to be calming while others, such as lemon oil, are supposedly stimulating.

While there’s conflicting research on the subject, some believe that aromatherapy helps with certain mental health conditions, namely depression and stress. In particular, massage therapy using essential oils has been found to alleviate some symptoms of depression and short-term stress, but there are studies that challenge these findings as well. In terms of alleviating physical symptoms, the evidence is also relatively inconclusive. There are a few health care professionals who use aromatherapy to aid pregnant folks in the labor process, and some studies show that it may help to induce sleep and reduce nausea. That being said, other studies show no change in symptoms with the use of essential oils. Lavender oil, in particular, has been studied to determine if it can reduce stress, anxiety, and pain, but there is little scientific evidence to support or refute lavender oil’s effectiveness.
If you're interested in starting any aromatherapy program, it's wise for you to consult your healthcare provider and a trained aromatherapist. Based on your medical history and lifestyle, they may be able to determine if you’re a suitable candidate for aromatherapy. Some essential oils (such as lavender) aren't intended for ingestion, and some people have allergies to certain oils, so it's wise to do some research before ingesting any essential oil. If you've chosen to apply any oils directly to the skin, it's recommended to start with a patch test on a small area of skin to make sure that you aren't allergic. Additionally, lavender and tea tree oil may act as endocrine disrupting chemicals, which may affect hormone production.

When it comes to treating medical illness, there's little proof that aromatherapy is effective. However, some essential oils may have the power to lift your mood, just as the smell of hot apple pie conjures up a cozy, happy feeling for some folks. If you're considering aromatherapy, it's good to sniff out reliable information and reputable experts!

Alice!
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