Does aromatherapy work? [1]

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. 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 oils therapy, uses aromatic oils derived from plant parts like roots, bark, or leaves. Since essential oils are very concentrated, they can be expensive. For example, it takes 1,000 pounds of rose flowers to produce just 1 ounce of rose essential oil. Essential oils can be combined with lotion for a body massage, added to warm bath water, or inhaled via a room spray or incense. Some essential oils are said to be calming while others are stimulating. In fact, studies have found that lemon oil (known as a stimulant) elevates mood. Another essential oil, lavender, was tested as a pain reliever but had no effect.

Before starting any aromatherapy program you should consult your health care provider and a trained aromatherapist. Based on your medical history and lifestyle, they should be able to determine if you are a suitable candidate for aromatherapy. Some examples of people who should avoid aromatherapy include:

- Pregnant women should not use: thyme, rosemary, tea tree, basil, clove, clary sage, clove, camphor, fennel, marjoram, juniper, hyssop, nutmeg, lemongrass, or myrrh. Some of these essential oils may trigger contractions or miscarriage.
- You should steer clear of essential oils if you suffer from a serious heart or kidney condition, fever, swollen ankles, or thrombosis.
- Epileptics should avoid peppermint because it may trigger seizures. However, aromatherapy has also been used to treat epilepsy by training the body to relax in response to a particular odor.
- People with lung conditions like asthma or respiratory disease should not use essential oils.
- People with skin sensitivity or allergies may also be bothered by aromatherapy.
- You should never massage essential oils over varicose veins, recent scar tissue,
inflamed areas of skin, or skin infections.

If these conditions don't apply, and you're still interested in aromatherapy, take care to begin slowly. Whenever using a new essential oil or spice, start with a patch test on a small area of skin to make sure that you are not allergic to that particular substance.

For more information about aromatherapy and other natural holistic methods, check out the related questions about non-traditional health practices.

As for 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. If you're considering aromatherapy, just follow your nose!

Alice!

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