

## Scent of a Woman

Aromatherapy comes of age | by Barbara Tunick



The wafting smell of a freshly baked apple pie warm from the oven. The sweet, enveloping perfume of lavender on a summer's morning. The fresh, crisp smell of aftershave on your dad's still-damp face. Aromas. They have the ability to transport us back to another place and time—to unlock emotions and memories tucked away in our subconscious. But do certain aromas have the ability to

heal, to calm or to invigorate us? To soothe our headaches and quell our fears?

Aromatherapy—the practice of using essential oils derived from plants for their therapeutic properties—dates back to ancient times when the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians and Chinese relied on essences pressed from aromatic peel, seeds, leaves and flowers to heal wounds, prevent illnesses and

energize the body. Today, aromatherapy is everywhere you turn—in dish detergents, baby lotions and bubble baths. Proponents say these essential oils have myriad tangible benefits. Naysayers claim aromatherapy is nothing more than liking the way certain things smell or, at best, the ability of certain aromas to trigger memories or emotions.

“On one extreme, there is the placebo effect in which aromas work because we tell people that they work,” says Bryan Raudenbush, PhD, assistant professor of psychology at Wheeling Jesuit University, in Wheeling, West Virginia. “On the other extreme, there is the physiological effect, where odors actually change us in some way. Most of the scientific research points to something in the middle, particularly in the area of mood and emotion. Certain odors, such as jasmine, calm us down, helping us to relax. Others, such as peppermint, are stimulating to the senses and thus perk us up.”

“There's nothing magical or pharmacological about aromatherapy,” says Rachel Herz, PhD, assistant professor of psychology at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. “If aromatherapy works, it's because our sense of smell is linked to our memory and emotion, so it triggers our emotions and affects how we feel. It's an associative or cultural phenomena. It works because people expect it to work, sort of like self-hypnosis or mind over matter.”



▼ Aromatherapy has many therapeutic benefits, says neurologist Alan Hirsch, MD, neurologic director of the Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago and author of *Scentsational Weight Loss*. Our olfactory system directly affects our limbic system, the area of our brain that controls

our emotions, desires and memories, Hirsch says. In a study of 3,193 people that was published in 1995 in the *Journal of Neurological and Orthopaedic Medicine and Surgery*, Hirsch and other researchers found that the scent of bananas, green apples and peppermint helped people lose weight.

“On average, our overweight volunteers lost about 30 pounds, or 5 pounds a month for 6 months, just by sniffing inhalers whenever they felt hungry,” Hirsch says. “The aromas worked on the satiety center in the brain. The patients felt full because their brains smelled enough food to feel satisfied.”

## Make Scents of Aromatherapy

Whether you're worried about world events or stressed due to day-to-day concerns, here are some soothing products to help you relax.

- **Aromatherapy Vaporizer** from Aura Cacia. This diffuser comes with a filter, ½ oz. of an essential oil blend, operating instructions and a guide to essential oils. 800.437.3301; [www.frontiercoop.com](http://www.frontiercoop.com)
- **Aroma Mask Cooling Eye Compress** from Nelson Bach. Relieve discomfort with this mask made from witch hazel water to comfort and regenerate your eyes. 800.319.9151; [www.nelsonbach.com](http://www.nelsonbach.com)
- **De-Stress Essential Oil Blend** from NOW Foods. This blend combines essential oils of cardamom, lemon and lavender to ease tension, stress and anxiety. 888.669.3663; [www.nowfoods.com](http://www.nowfoods.com)
- **Amber Glass Bottle** from Tisserand Aromatherapy. A 9-millimeter amber glass bottle with a drop top, perfect for storing your essential oil blends. 800.227.5120; [www.avalon-naturalproducts.com](http://www.avalon-naturalproducts.com)

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## Out of the Lab

Aromatherapy has slowly found its way into labor and delivery rooms, pain centers, pediatric oncology wards and hospices across the country. At the Integrative Therapies Program for Children with Cancer at Columbia University and Children's Hospital of New York Presbyterian in New York City, aromatherapy is used to help children undergoing chemotherapy and radiation.

"Some people say that aromatherapy works because it elicits a memory; others say it releases neurotransmitters in the brain, especially when the essential oils are massaged and absorbed into the bloodstream," says Elena Ladas, MS, RD, and director of the Integrative Therapies Program. "Personally, I can tell you with certainty that the aromatic oils help alleviate many of the side effects of chemotherapy and radiation therapy. It also helps reduce our kids' anxiety, nausea and sleeplessness."

Essential oils—highly concentrated substances extracted from medicinal and aromatic plants such as lavender, rose or magnolia—are either diffused in the air or diluted in sesame oil and massaged into a patient's acupressure points, which are specific trigger points that traditional Chinese medicine says will release blocked energy when massaged. Ladas says that lavender is usually the first line of defense in treating anxiety and sleeping problems. Peppermint and citrus are the top scents used to relieve chemotherapy- and radiation-related nausea.

## Mounting Evidence

Nancy Wiand, CNS, RN, clinical nurse specialist and lactation consultant, carries lavender, bergamot—a small sour orange—and peppermint in her black bag of relief at the birth center of Robinson

Memorial Hospital in Ravenna, Ohio. "Aromatherapy helps alleviate our patients' nausea, pain and anxiety. And certain essential oils such as frankincense, jasmine or clary sage help tone the uterus, preparing it for childbirth, and help strengthen contractions," she says. "Aromatherapy oils help lengthen the time

of a contraction, which dilates the cervix and helps the delivery process. But this should only be done by an obstetrical nurse or midwife trained in aromatherapy."

An 8-year study of 8,058 mothers in childbirth at Oxford Brookes University in England, published



## 10 Essential Aromatic Essences

Throughout history, people have used aromatic oils to prevent and treat illnesses. Today, aromatherapy is gaining popularity and is used by some conventional doctors as an adjunct therapy to improve their patients' health and well-being. Essential oils can be inhaled or mixed with an unscented carrier oil—such as almond or olive—then used in a massage. Below are some of the most popular essential oils and their expected health benefits.

Oil	Aroma	Origin	Benefits
Bergamot	Refreshing, citrus-like, sweet, floral	Derived from the rind of an orange-like fruit	Calms, relieves pain
Chamomile (Roman)	Sweet, earthy	Pressed from daisy-like flowers	Calms, relaxes, relieves pain
Clary Sage	Sweet, nutty, herbal	Made from the flowering tops of the plant	Relaxes, relieves pain, alleviates postpartum depression and tension headaches
Eucalyptus	Fresh, pungent	Extracted from fresh or partially dried plant leaves and young twigs	Relieves pain, clears respiratory passages
Geranium	Sweet, floral	Distilled from the leaves of the plant	Calms, relieves pain, acts as antidepressant, uplifts
Ginger	Spicy, pungent, warm, sweet	Derived from the unpeeled or dried, ground root of this perennial herb	Reduces nausea and vomiting, energizes
Jasmine	Intensely warm, rich, floral	Made from the small, white flowers of this shrub and picked at night when the aroma is most intense	Relieves pain, stimulates contractions, acts as antidepressant
Lavender	Fresh, soft, floral	Distilled from the pale purple-blue flowers of this evergreen woody shrub	Relieves pain, relieves anxiety, acts as antidepressant, promotes relaxation and sleep
Neroli	Delicate, floral, sweet, warm	Derived from the small, white, waxy flowers of the bitter-orange tree	Acts as antidepressant, sedates, soothes, restores energy
Peppermint	Fresh, penetrating, minty	Distilled from the fresh or partly dried part of the plant that grows above ground	Relieves nausea, vomiting, pain and headaches

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in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* in April 2000, found that aromatherapy can help reduce maternal anxiety, fear and/or pain during labor. More than 50 percent of mothers rated aromatherapy as helpful and only 14 percent found it made no difference. Using aromatherapy during

childbirth appeared to reduce the need for additional pain relief. Up to 18 percent of women used no pain medication during labor after using essential oils.

The study also showed that aromatherapy may help strengthen contractions. When contractions first begin, they last for about

20–30 seconds, and as labor progresses, the contractions come more frequently, get stronger and last longer, for about 60–90 seconds. Sometimes, however, contractions stall, meaning that they don't progress. That's when aromatherapy can be useful: It can help contractions last longer and stay stronger because of the chemical properties in the essences.

“Geranium oil diluted in a carrier oil is particularly useful for moms who have swollen legs following a Caesarian section,” Wiand says. “The results were so consistently dramatic that we decided to measure the reduction. After a 20-minute superficial massage of the swollen legs, the swelling was reduced by an eighth of a centimeter. That might not sound like a lot, but to the mothers, it makes a significant difference in how they can move their legs.” Wiand learned of the benefits of geranium oil from Denise Tiran's book *Aromatherapy in Midwifery Practice*.

“Bergamot also helps alleviate pain. So does eucalyptus, roman chamomile, clary sage, frankincense, lavender, jasmine and rose when they are combined with a carrier oil and massaged onto painful areas. Peppermint is especially helpful for nausea. Sometimes all I have to do is uncap the bottle, and wave it under an expectant mom's nose,” says Wiand.

### Open to Interpretation

While people may disagree on how to measure aromatherapy's benefits, a small, clinical study by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, which was published in the November/December 2002 issue of the *American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Care*, tried to quantify aromatherapy's effectiveness in decreasing pain,

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anxiety and depression in 17 cancer hospice patients.

“We found that when we diffused lavender into the air for one hour, the patients’ blood pressure and pulse came down, as did their anxiety, pain and depression,” says study co-author, Susan Kowalski, RN, PhD. “They also reported an increased sense of well-being. The hospice now offers aromatherapy to patients who want to use it.”

“Aromatherapy is not a panacea, but it is quite effective when used as part of an overall program,” says Thomas Vetter, MD, an anesthesiologist and medical director of the Pain Center at Akron Children’s Hospital in Ohio. Vetter uses massages and cool-air diffusers to alleviate his patients’ headaches and chronic pain. “Many of the things we’re dealing with have to do with the mind-body connection,” he says. “Much of what we see is subjective and difficult to quantify. It’s not like administering a medication intravenously.”

Even so, Vetter says he usually sees results with his chronic-pain patients in 2–3 weeks when he uses a combination of aromatherapy, massage and acupuncture. He also has about a 60 percent success rate in treating teenage headaches. Vetter uses essential oils mixed with a carrier oil in massages to alleviate patients’ depression, stress, tension, fear and headaches.

“Some people might snub aromatherapy, but as a researcher, I tell you, it works,” says Wiand. “Unfortunately, there aren’t a lot of studies in mainstream journals, but there are studies in botanical and foreign literature, and I have witnessed the results first-hand. It’s not just a matter of enjoying pleasant smells. The chemicals in the oils cause physiological changes such as strengthening

uterine contractions or lowering blood pressure or relieving pain.”

While there might not be completely conclusive, scientific evidence as to how or why aromatherapy works, that hasn’t deterred medical practitioners who use it every day to help their patients deliver babies or endure painful

medical procedures. “I’m not sure why aromatherapy works,” admits Ladas, “but it seems to help patients through difficult times with minimal adverse effects. Aromatherapy may evolve as a powerful adjunct therapy to conventional medicine. As health care



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providers, we are always trying to offer great medicine without toxic side effects. Aromatherapy seems to do just that.”

### Aromatherapy at Home

Essential oils can easily be used at home in the following manners.

- **In a massage.** Dilute 3–5 drops of essential oil with one teaspoon of an unscented carrier oil—any oil used to dilute pure essential oils—such as sweet almond, sesame seed or olive oil. One teaspoon of massage oil is enough for a full-body massage.
- **In a cool-air diffuser.** All oils may be diffused in cool-air diffusers. Diffusers are available online and at some health food stores. Diffusion should be limited to about 15 minutes at a time.
- **From a bottle.** For a quick pick-me-up, use peppermint or lemon. To de-stress, use lavender or roman chamomile. Simply take the cap off the bottle, and take a quick sniff or two.
- **In a bathtub.** Try adding a few drops of your favorite essential oils to your bath. You'll breathe in the vapors and absorb the oil through your skin.
- **Under a pillow.** If you're having trouble sleeping, try putting a few drops of lavender essential oil under your pillow.

*Editor's Note: Pregnant women should not use aromatherapy without the consent of their health care practitioner.*