

AROMATHERAPY.

The very word arouses a sense of peaceful stimulation. The soothing scents from a bath or massage help to ease the mind and body and reinvigorate the blood flow. The American Heritage Stedman's Medical Dictionary defines aromatherapy as "the use of selected fragrant substances in lotions and inhalants in an effort to affect mood and promote health." Most people who use scented candles, lotions, bath gels and potpourri in their homes would be inclined to agree. What we smell has a lot to do with how we feel and can even recall certain memories.

The use of essential oils is believed to date back thousands of years to Ancient Egypt, China, the Middle East and to Native Americans, when the oils were used for their scent and for preservation, such as with embalming. The practice of modern aromatherapy is largely attributed to the French chemist, René-Maurice Gattefossé, in the early 20th century. Today, it is used to calm, uplift and relax us through a variety of methods and treatments.

Can a smell really affect the way we feel? Are essential oils effective in treating ailments? Why do experts in the field swear by aromatherapy? And what are its benefits and its dangers?

Anne Marie Smith, a licensed master esthetician and body therapist with 20 years of experience in the use of aromatherapy, and owner of Skincare Solutions on St. Simons Island, explains that when the essential oils enter the body, the entire nervous system and glandular organs are affected.

"Aromatherapy is the most gracious visitor of all," she explains. When the oil enters the body, "it does its work at repair, regeneration and then takes its exit via the eliminatory organs."

Phuong Dai, a massage therapist with Island D-Spa on St. Simons Island, says the scent goes to the brain and then works through the nervous system. Then, "the whole body is relaxed," and, he says, the scent can even heal.

Both therapists work individually with their clients to apply the appropriate oils according to the clients' needs. Dai might use Arnica or Juniper Cypress to relieve pain in the body, muscles and joints. Smith will use a blending of 20 to 40 different essential oils.

Natural oils are used with aromatherapy. To know if an oil is organic, Smith suggests checking out the manufacturer's Web site because it will list the percentage of active oils. A consumer will also want to find out where the oils have been harvested, the company's history and if the company has integrity. There are more intricate tests you can request, she adds, which the company should provide.

There are some precautions with aromatherapy. Before using essential oils, check with your doctor, particularly if you have any ailments, diseases or conditions. For example, Smith and Dai both agree that aromatherapy should be avoided if a woman is pregnant because some oils can cause uterine contractions. Also, some people have allergies to certain scents, so discuss this with your doctor and aromatherapist.

And Smith warns when mixing your own essential oils, a beginner shouldn't go beyond using a couple of the single notes – that is, using one oil instead of blending them with other essential oils.

"These chemicals are in families of chemicals and you have to understand what they do and how to use them," she says.

Commercial oils will provide instructions on the bottle and they are already customized to make the particular blend unique.

The use of aromatherapy is a study in itself. Does it affect the whole person? Stress plays a large factor on how our bodies feel physically and emotionally. Whether you are preparing for a big event, like your wedding day, or simply want to focus on well-being, read on for ways aromatherapy can help to combat stress and rejuvenate the body.

STRESS

"Lavender is so popular," Dai explains.

For relaxation, he suggests adding lavender to your routine in the shower or the tub. He says the scent, combined with the warm water, will help make the entire body relax.

Smith suggests custom blending a scrub with some soothing essential oils.

"There are many constituents that could make up an anti-stress formula. Lavender would be one, but also Roman chamomile." She adds that "all anti-stress formulas are not alike." She recommends staying "with the simplicity of getting a nice carrier oil whether it's grapeseed or jojoba, and then add your single notes," such as "a lavender or a chamomile for soothing." And she warns that essential oils should be put into a carrier oil and never directly applied to the skin.

Dai also reminds us that the aroma from the herbs we use in our food can affect our well-being. Herbs like basil, ginger and rosemary, cooked fresh and blended with our tasty dish, can have a soothing affect.

SKIN

Anyone who suffers from acne or troubled skin will tell you — stress affects the skin. And an outbreak before an important event is a nightmare. But problem skin can be helped and even avoided with aromatherapy treatments.

Smith says to avoid acidics. This would include alcohol, caffeine and certain fruits, vegetables and meats. "The more acidic you are, the more you are going to see acne live in that condition." She suggests doing a detoxifying treatment, but warns that any such treatment and any extraction and purifying work should be done a week to two weeks ahead of an important event, "just to make sure everything that is going to come out, comes out."

She's careful to use soothing blends of essential oils on the skin, especially for people who have acne, Rosacea

