

Essential Oils and Your Health

People across the United States have been turning to essential oils more and more frequently in recent years. Their growing popularity has made them easy to access, and there seems to be an essential oil for everything. But are they really good for your health? Rachel Gustafson, an OSF HealthCare family medicine advanced practice nurse, breaks it down for us.

“They can be used topically, aromatically, or some people take them as capsules. They can help with reductions in stress, nausea, anxiety, depression, headaches – there is a wide range of reasons people use them,” says Gustafson.

There are a number of scents that have different benefits to them, but some scents in particular are more widely used than others. Lavender is commonly used for decreasing stress, anxiety, and aiding in sleep; lemon is recommended for a fresh, clean feeling; peppermint helps with headaches and nausea; and tea tree is widely used in skin care. There are also products available that combine two or more oils in one container based on your needs.

Once you determine which essential oils you are looking for, figuring out where to get them can be tricky. Essential oils can be found in nearly every bricks and mortar store and are available on popular online platforms like Amazon. While they are not hard to find, how do you know which ones are deemed safe and best for your health?

Whether you are an essential oils connoisseur or you are dabbling in them for the first time, Gustafson says educating yourself is key.

“You need to do your research when buying them. You want to make sure you are buying pure oils, not oils that are usually off the shelf and compounded with other chemicals. You want to make sure you can look up where the plants are actually being derived from and that they are 100% pure grade essential oil,” Gustafson explains.

You have selected the scents that will be most beneficial for you and have even found where to get them. The last important step is knowing what form of oil you should get. Gustafson typically recommends topical or aromatic essential oils as opposed to oral.

“As long as it is not a very potent oil, you can usually apply them directly to your skin. Most of the time it’s for more of a localized effect, like if you have a painful joint and need some relief there, if you have a headache and put it at the base of your neck, or for nausea you can rub it on your stomach. But you want to make sure that it’s not too potent or sensitive to your skin. If it is, you should dilute with a carrier oil such as vegetable or coconut oil,” advises Gustafson.

Some people love the health benefits that essential oils provide but do not necessarily enjoy the scents. If you think you would prefer to consume essential oils in the form of a capsule, Gustafson advises to use caution – especially if the reason you are using them is to help ease symptoms of an underlying health condition.

“If people are consuming them as capsules and they are on other medications, I would certainly recommend discussing it with their provider just to make sure there is no interaction with anything they are taking. Essential oils do play a role in providing a positive impact in your life and your health, as long as you are using them safely and responsibly,” Gustafson says.

While essential oils can be extremely beneficial, they should be used in conjunction with – and not in replacement of – any health care plan recommended to you. Gustafson stresses that it is important not to rely solely on essential oils and to stick to any guidelines provided by your health care provider.

“Whether you have hypothyroidism or hypertension or lupus, you can use oils to supplement and help with symptomatic control – but it is not going to change your chemical structure or cure a disease process,” explains Gustafson.

Essential oils have many benefits to them but it is important to use them safely. If you have any questions or concerns about using essential oils or are unsure which ones would be best for you, consult with your health care provider.