**Using essential oils safely**

Essential oils have been used for centuries for their healing properties – but like anything that has beneficial effects, the compounds that make essential oils effective must be used carefully and treated with respect. Some essential oils can be poisonous if absorbed directly through the skin, while some citrus-based oils like orange, lime, and lemon, can cause a skin irritation called phototoxicity if they are applied before going out in the sun.

It’s important that you take care when using essential oils – for example most oils shouldn’t be applied directly to your skin, as this can cause a rash. In most cases, aromatherapy oils are perfectly safe to use diluted with a carrier oil, as in aromatherapy massage.

**Remember to dilute essential oils first**

It’s wise to assume that you will have to dilute your essential oils before using them. As a rule, keep the concentration levels of essential oils below five per cent. To give you an idea of what this means in practice; diluting at one per cent is equivalent to adding six drops of essential oil to one ounce of carrier oil such as sweet almond oil. For young children there are separate guidelines to follow.

Oils that can (carefully) be used neat:

* chamomile
* cypress
* eucalyptus
* lavender
* tea tree
* rose
* sandalwood

Any others not on the list MUST be diluted and it’s wise to patch test those that don’t need to be before using them on your skin, too.

**Carrying out a patch test**

Patch tests give you the chance to test whether your skin will react to a particular oil before you use it in a topical treatment. To do a patch test:

* Wash your forearm with a mild, unscented soap, then pat dry.
* Rub a few drops of your chosen diluted oil into a small patch on your forearm and cover with gauze.
* Wait for 24 hours, then remove the gauze.
* If the area you’ve tested looks red, itchy, blistered, or swollen, don’t use the oil.
* If you feel any irritation or discomfort before the end of the 24-hour period, wash the area again to remove the oil.

**Using essential oils in pregnancy**

It’s best to avoid any kind of aromatherapy treatments in the first trimester of pregnancy. Although most oils are safe, some have been known to cause adverse reactions and it’s better to avoid any potential problems.

After the first three months, some essential oils can help reduce anxiety about pregnancy and labor. It’s advisable to discuss any use of essential oils with your midwife or healthcare provider before going ahead.

Some oils must be avoided during pregnancy, labor and while breastfeeding, and these are:

* camphor
* parsley seed
* hyssop
* pennyroyal
* tarragon
* wintergreen
* wormwood

**Are essential oils safe for infants and children?**

Infants and children have thinner skin and their immune systems are less developed than an adult's which makes them potentially more vulnerable to toxicity/adverse reactions. Aromatherapy can still be used on children and infants, but you should get professional advice and be careful. Always speak to your healthcare provider before you use essential oils on infants and children.

Once children are over the age of two, some essential oils can be used but at a much weaker concentration than for adults; typically 0.5 to 2.5 percent.

* Diluting at one percent is equivalent to adding six drops of essential oil to an ounce of carrier oil. You really don’t need much oil at all with children.
* Don’t apply peppermint oil topically or diffused it around children under the age of six, and eucalyptus under the age of ten.
* Keep essential oils out of children’s reach to avoid accidental ingestion.