



The ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO ESSENTIAL Oils

Sure, they smell good, but essential oils can do so much more than delight your senses. Here's how to harness the healing power of these potent drops using DIY recipes and store-bought blends for everything from headaches and stuffy noses to stinky mats and household pests.

BY SALLY WADYKA ✎ PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER OLSON

IT'S NO SECRET that yogis adore essential oils. Your teachers probably give recommendations for their favorites during class or use them on students in Savasana—the oils may even be for sale at your local studio. And that can be a good thing when it comes to your health. “Although many people think of essential oils as just perfume, they actually have medicinal effects,” explains Laurie Steelsmith, ND, LAc, naturopath and co-author of *Natural Choices for Women's Health*. “Essential oils contain compounds used by the plants to prevent bugs from eating them and bacteria from growing on them.” That's why, when we distill plants into highly concentrated extracts, they also have the ability to help us repel pests and fight off infections—plus they provide myriad other physical and mental benefits.

True, many essential oils don't come cheaply (and you should beware of those that do!). That's because it takes *pounds* of plants to make just a few *ounces* of oil. “To produce eight ounces of lavender essential oil, a grower needs to distill 75 pounds of freshly harvested lavender plants,” explains Hope Gillerman, author of *Essential Oils Every Day*. “That's the equivalent of 250 plastic bins of salad

greens!” And while this may sound wasteful, Gillerman stresses that by spending a little more for high-quality, organic essential oils, it helps ensure that the farmers producing those plants are following sustainable practices. It's also a good reminder not to be careless or lavish when using your oils, in part because you don't need much to get a benefit. “The chemical components in essential oils are effective in very low dilutions,” says Mindy Green, herbalist, aromatherapist, and instructor at the University of Arizona's Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine. “Think of them as medicinal, not just recreational.”

There are many ways to tap into the therapeutic effects of an essential oil: You can massage it into your skin, inhale it from the bottle, diffuse it throughout a room, drop it into the bath, or spritz it onto your yoga mat to keep it fresh. Turn the page for science-backed ways to safely use nature's miracle medicines for healing, cleaning, and more.

PROP-STYLIST: ERICA MCNEESH

Feel-Good blends

ESSENTIAL OILS have been used for medicinal purposes for thousands of years, and anecdotal evidence of their benefits abounds. But more recently, researchers have investigated essential oils more rigorously and found these ancient remedies to be surprisingly effective for certain conditions—so much so that aromatherapy treatments are even showing up in some hospitals. “We use essential oils for reduction of anxiety for both patients and their families, and also as part of our nonpharmacological pain-management strategy,” says Donna Audia, RN, a holistic nurse at the University of Maryland Medical Center. “Pain has physical and emotional components, and the sense of smell has a strong emotional component.”

To bring these healing therapies home, experiment with the DIY blends here. A couple of quick pointers before you start: One, store your solutions in dark or tinted glass bottles, if possible, to keep the essential oils at their freshest and most potent (natural light can degrade components). And two, if you need to use a plastic bottle (in the shower, for example, with body wash or shampoo containing essential oils), make sure the bottle is BPA free to prevent that toxin from contaminating your blend.

FOR NASAL AND CHEST CONGESTION

Steam a blend of chamomile, eucalyptus, spearmint, and thyme

“Steam inhalation is the best way to break up mucus because it opens nasal passages, getting debris out of the sinuses and bringing the vapors right into the lungs,” says Laurie Steelsmith, ND, LAc. She suggests adding one drop each of chamomile, eucalyptus, spearmint, and thyme essential oils to four cups boiling water, covering your head with a towel, closing your eyes (to prevent any possible irritation), and deeply breathing the steam for five minutes. Repeat two to three times per day.

FOR SORE MUSCLES

Roll-on frankincense, helichrysum, and rosemary

Studies have identified an anti-inflammatory effect of frankincense and rosemary essential oils when used topically. Herbalist Mindy Green suggests harnessing that power to relieve muscle pain and inflammation by blending 3 drops each of frankincense, helichrysum (a plant in the sunflower family with anti-spasmodic properties), and rosemary into 1 oz of carrier oil and placing it in a roller bottle. Keep this blend in your yoga bag and apply it to sore muscles after class.

SAFETY FIRST

Because essential oils are so potent, you need to be cautious about how you use them. Follow these safety tips:

- 1. DON'T** apply them to your skin without first diluting them; risks include an allergic reaction. For the face or neck, the National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy recommends a 1 percent dilution (6 drops in 1 oz of carrier oil). For a full-body application, such as a massage oil, use at least a 2.5 percent dilution (15 drops in 1 oz of carrier oil). And for a targeted area, use up to a 10 percent dilution (60 drops in 1 oz of carrier oil).
- 2. DO** consult a doc before ingesting essential oils. Drinking them—either neat or mixed into a

beverage like water, juice, or tea—often irritates the lining of the esophagus or stomach, causing reflux, heartburn, or even an allergic reaction.

- 3. DON'T** apply essential oils directly to the inside of the nose. It can irritate nasal passages.
- 4. DO** use soap and water to remove essential oil from the skin. If you use too much oil or have a reaction, wiping it off with a wet towel will only spread the oil.
- 5. DO** use caution with pets. Avoid essential oils around cats, who don't have the enzymes to metabolize them, putting them at risk of toxicity. With dogs, test an oil by letting your pooch sniff it from a foot away—if he turns away from the smell, test other oils until you find one he won't reject. Avoid adding oil to his fur.

FOR STRESS RELIEF

Soak in a bergamot bath

A recent study used measurements of salivary cortisol (the stress hormone) to test the efficacy of bergamot on anxiety and stress. The group that inhaled bergamot for 15 minutes showed greater reduction in salivary cortisol than those in the control group. Charlynn Avery, an aromatherapist and national educator for Aura Cacia, recommends inhaling bergamot while you relax in a bath. Mix 18 drops bergamot, ½ tbsp sweet almond oil, and 2 oz sea salt. Add mixture to a full tub.

FOR HEADACHES

Inhale lavender oil

Inhaling lavender essential oil for 15 minutes reduces the severity of migraine headaches, finds a placebo-controlled clinical trial published in the journal *European Neurology*. Make your own headache-helper by mixing 6 drops of lavender essential oil with 1 oz almond oil or other neutral carrier oil. Put a dab under your nose and inhale slowly and deeply.

Home solutions

Essential oils have a number of surprisingly practical applications around the house. Try these recipes for natural alternatives to chemical-based cleaners and repellents.

YOGA-MAT SPRAY Keep your mat fresh by spritzing it with a blend of 48 drops each of tea tree, lavender, and oregano essential oils mixed into 4 oz of water. Studies highlight the potent antibacterial and antifungal effects of tea tree and oregano essential oils; meanwhile, the lavender adds a soothing scent that's perfect for setting the mood for your practice.

MOSQUITO REPELLENT

A review in *Malaria Journal* cited evidence in favor of several essential oils as repellents. To help fend off bugs, blend 2 drops eucalyptus, 1 drop peppermint, and 1 drop geranium in ½ tsp aloe vera and 3 tbsp water. Place in a spray bottle, shake, and spritz on skin.

BATHROOM OR KITCHEN CLEANER

Add 2 tsp lemon essential oil and ¼ tsp tea tree essential oil to an 8-oz 50/50 blend of water and white vinegar. Lemon has antiseptic abilities, and a review in the journal *Clinical Microbiology Reviews* found that tea tree oil is an effective antimicrobial agent.

MOUSE REPELLENT

Peppermint is the active ingredient in many store-bought mouse-repellent formulas. Place a few drops of peppermint essential oil on a cotton ball and stash it anywhere (out of reach of pets!) you've seen mice or droppings.

SHOP SMART

1. Go organic

To get the most out of your essential oils, look for the "USDA organic" seal and name of the certifying body (like Oregon Tilth or ECOCERT) on the label. This typically helps ensure you're buying essential oils that meet industry standards of authenticity and that haven't been diluted, adulterated, or contaminated with synthetic compounds, including pesticides.



A few companies we like:

- Aura Cacia (auracacia.com)
- Mountain Rose Herbs (mountainroseherbs.com)
- NOW Solutions (nowfoods.com)
- Veriditas (veriditasbotanicals.com)

2. Find your diffuser



For home:
Nature's Truth
Essential Oil Diffuser

Plug this compact diffuser into an outlet and use 5 drops of oil to fill a room with subtle scent (\$40, naturestrutharoma.com).



For travel:
Aura Cacia USB
Essential Oil Diffuser

A unique solution for scenting your personal space, even when power outlets are scarce. This portable diffuser draws its power from any USB outlet (\$40, auracacia.com).



For the shower:

Essio Aromatherapy Shower Kit

Reinvent your morning or evening shower routine by adding essential oils for a spa-like experience. Simply clip the diffuser to your shower pipe and insert an organic Essio pod containing an essential-oil blend (customized for relaxing, rejuvenating, clarifying, clearing a stuffy nose, etc.). Aim it toward the stream of water, and the oils will diffuse into the shower (\$45, essioshower.com).



For any time:

**Aroma Couture
Women's Aroma Necklaces**

The pendants contain a bamboo-fabric disc. Just place a few drops of essential oil on the disc and enjoy the aromatherapeutic benefits for 3 to 5 days; add more drops as the scent fades.

Try some calming lavender before a meditation session, or some energizing peppermint prior to vinyasa practice (\$23–42, aromacouturejewelry.com).