



DementiaUK
Helping families face dementia

Aromatherapy



Aromatherapy is the use of aromatic plant or essential oils to promote wellbeing through scent. Like any complementary therapy, it's not a replacement for medical treatment and should only be used if it appears to bring some pleasure or calm to the person being treated.

Aromatherapy scents are released by warming oil in oil burners, adding it to baths, dripping the scent onto pillows and tissues, or massaging infusions of the oil into the skin with cream.

Undiluted essential oils can be irritating to skin so please read the label to make sure the oil is suitable for your purpose.

Aromatherapy and dementia

Aromatherapy has been used for centuries to relieve stress and to promote better sleep. Lavender oil dripped sparingly onto a pillow or into a bath before bedtime is said to aid sleep. Eucalyptus oil is a very strong smelling oil useful for clearing the sinuses when suffering from a cold. Lemon Melissa balm, applied as a lotion, can have a calming effect.

Small studies have been conducted into aromatherapy and dementia. They have shown some encouraging results but more research needs to be done. The main findings of these studies were into the effects of lavender oil, dripped onto a pillow or applied through massage in the form of a cream, and Lemon Melissa balm, rubbed into the skin. Both oils were found to increase the length of time of sleep of people with dementia, and decrease signs of agitation such as wandering and excessive movement.

Practical tips on aromatherapy and dementia

- A personalised approach for the person with dementia is vital. Consider whether they are comfortable with being touched if you are considering a massage. A massage with essential oils may not be suitable if they have eczema, psoriasis, allergies, cuts or bruises or delicate skin
- Scent is a powerful and evocative sense. Try giving the person with dementia a tissue with a drop or two of the essential oil to see how they react to the smell,

before embarking on any further aromatherapy

- Talk with the person and their family to find out whether aromatherapy is something they have used in the past
- Practice aromatherapy in a well-ventilated area
- Best results may come from consistent use, so if the person with dementia seems to enjoy the treatment, consider practising every day
- Do not experiment with different oils together; choose the best one linked to the outcome you hope for and stick with that
- Discontinue your practice immediately if a rash appears on the skin

Things to be aware of

- Aromatherapy oils are potent and may cause a headache, which a person with dementia might not be able to communicate to you
- The smells may trigger memories for the person, which they may find confusing or distressing

- Some oils have a stimulating effect, for example Thyme oil. Stimulation could possibly lead to increased agitation
- Using oils with a calming effect may be best practised in the evening, shortly before bed

Sources of support

Dementia UK leaflet on Life story work

www.dementiauk.org/life-story

Dementia UK leaflet on Use of dolls

www.dementiauk.org/doll-therapy

Dementia UK Admiral Nurse advice video on Calming techniques

www.dementiauk.org/maintaining-health-in-dementia-videos

Dementia UK leaflet on Dealing with restlessness

www.dementiauk.org/dealing-with-restlessness

The information in this booklet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses.

We are always looking to improve our resources, to provide the most relevant support for families living with dementia. If you have feedback about any of our leaflets, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

We receive no government funding and rely on voluntary donations, including gifts in Wills.

For more information on how to support Dementia UK, please visit www.dementiauk.org/donate or call **0300 365 5500**.

Publication date: Dec 2020

Review date: Dec 2022

© Dementia UK 2020



If you're caring for someone with dementia or if you have any other concerns or questions, call or email our Admiral Nurses for specialist support and advice.

Call **0800 888 6678** or email helpline@dementiauk.org

Open Monday – Friday, 9am – 9pm
Saturday and Sunday, 9am – 5pm



www.dementiauk.org • info@dementiauk.org

Dementia UK, 7th Floor, One Aldgate, London EC3N 1RE
Dementia UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1039404) and Scotland (SC047429).