



DementiaUK
Helping families face dementia

Aromatherapy and dementia



Aromatherapy is the use of aromatic plant oils to promote wellbeing through scent. Like all complementary therapies, it is not a replacement for medical treatment, but for some people, it creates a sense of pleasure and calm.

Aromatherapy and dementia

Aromatherapy has been used for centuries to relieve stress and promote better sleep. For example:

- **Lavender oil** is said to aid sleep
- **Eucalyptus oil** is a strong-smelling oil that is useful for clearing the sinuses when someone has a cold
- **Lemon balm**, also called Melissa, can have a calming effect

Several small studies have been conducted into aromatherapy and dementia, and although more research needs to be done, they have shown some encouraging results.

The main studies looked at the effects of lavender oil (dripped onto a pillow or applied through

massage in the form of a cream) and lemon balm (rubbed into the skin). Both oils were found to increase the length of time people with dementia spent asleep and decrease signs of agitation such as pacing and restless movement.

Massage, aromatherapy and dementia

Massage is an alternative therapy involving different types of physical touch, using the hands to manipulate soft tissue and muscles. It aims to relax and revive the person, release muscle tension and improve health and wellbeing.

Most places on the body can be massaged, with common places including the hands, head, neck and shoulders, back and feet. Often, aromatherapy oils are used for their therapeutic properties and to help the hands glide over the skin.

A small number of studies have indicated that massage can improve anxiety and distress for people with dementia. For example, one study found that a hand massage could have an immediate – but short-term – effect on agitated behaviour.



However, more research is needed into understanding the impact of aromatherapy and massage for people with dementia.

It is also very important to bear in mind that not all people enjoy or are soothed by massage or aromatherapy. In some people with dementia, it may cause discomfort or distress.

How to use aromatherapy oils

There are various ways to use aromatherapy oils. Many oils can be used on the skin – for example,

dabbed onto pulse points, rubbed into the skin or used for massage.

Be aware, though, that undiluted essential oils can be very strong and may cause irritation. It is usually recommended that a few drops are added to a ‘base’ or ‘carrier’ oil to dilute them. These are neutral plant-based oils like olive, almond or wheatgerm oil. Always read the label to ensure the oil can be used for your intended purpose.

Alternatively, aromatherapy oils can be dripped onto a tissue, handkerchief or pillowcase for

the person to inhale, or added to a bath. You can also use a candle-powered oil burner to warm the oils so they give off their scent, or a battery-operated or electric diffuser which combines the oil with water and releases it as a fine mist.

If you would like to harness the benefits of aromatherapy for a person with dementia but feel that the oils may be too harsh or overpowering, you could use a milder scented hand cream, body lotion, bubble bath or bath oil instead.

While these may not have a strong therapeutic effect, their fragrance may be appealing, and using a scent that the person has enjoyed in the past may bring back pleasant memories.

Practical tips for aromatherapy and dementia

- A personalised approach for the person with dementia is vital. For example, if you are considering giving them a massage, think about whether they enjoy being touched
- Talk to the person and other family members or friends to find out if they have used and enjoyed aromatherapy in the past
- Buy essential oils from a reputable health shop and don't be afraid to ask for advice on choosing suitable oils
- Do not experiment with using different oils together – choose the one that is recommended for the outcome you hope for and stick with that
- Always tell the person what you are about to do, and ask their permission (if they are able to give it)
- Try putting a drop or two of essential oil on a tissue and giving it to the person to see how they react to the smell before embarking on any further aromatherapy – they may find some scents overpowering or unpleasant
- Using oils with a calming effect may be most beneficial in the evening, shortly before bed
- The best results may come



from consistent use, so if the person with dementia enjoys the treatment, consider repeating it every day

Things to be aware of

- Practise aromatherapy in a well-ventilated area
- 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 that the person finds confusing or upsetting, so watch their behaviour closely for signs of distress
- Some oils, such as thyme oil, have a stimulating effect which could increase agitation
- Essential oils may not be suitable if the person has eczema, psoriasis, allergies, cuts or bruises
- You should also take particular care when using aromatherapy or massage with a person who



is frail or has thin, delicate skin which is easily damaged

- Discontinue aromatherapy immediately if a rash appears
- If you are giving the person with dementia a foot massage, their skin is likely to be very slippery. To reduce the risk of falls, ensure you wash the oils off their skin afterwards, or that they put on socks and slippers
- If you are using essential oils in the person's bath, the bathtub will also be slippery, so be sure

to support the person as they get out

- There is a risk of fire if you are using essential oils in a candle-powered oil burner. Always follow the instructions carefully. Make sure you blow the candle out after use – consider whether it is safe for the person with dementia to be responsible for this. Never leave a lit candle unattended, even if only for a minute

Sources of support

To speak to a specialist dementia nurse about aromatherapy or any other aspect of dementia, please call our Helpline on **0800 888 6678** (Monday to Friday 9am-9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am-5pm) or email helpline@dementiauk.org

To book a phone or video call appointment with an Admiral Nurse, please visit dementiauk.org/book-a-clinic-appointment

Dementia UK resources

Life story work

dementiauk.org/life-story

Using dolls in dementia care

dementiauk.org/doll-therapy

Maintaining health in dementia – videos

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

Coping with distress

dementiauk.org/coping-with-distress

Dealing with restlessness

dementiauk.org/dealing-with-restlessness

Music and dementia

dementiauk.org/music

Anxiety and depression in dementia

dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety-and-depression



Dementia and sleep

dementiauk.org/good-habits-for-bedtime

Other resources

NHS: Complementary and alternative medicine

nhs.uk/conditions/complementary-and-alternative-medicine

Find a registered aromatherapist

aromatherapycouncil.org

The information in this leaflet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses. We hope you find it useful. If you have feedback, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

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Thank you.



If you have questions or concerns about any aspect of dementia, please contact our Admiral Nurses.

Helpline: **0800 888 6678** or helpline@dementiauk.org

Virtual clinics: dementiauk.org/book-a-clinic-appointment



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Dementia UK, 7th Floor, One Aldgate, London EC3N 1RE
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