

Aromatherapy and Arthritis

By Michele The Trainer

We have five senses: sight, touch, taste, feel and smell. Aromatherapy (aroma means scent) engages our olfactory senses (sense of smell) by utilizing essential oils in different forms. Essential oils must always be diluted, such as in hydrosols (essential oils with water), infusions (extracts of an essential oil) and carrier oils (for example, almond oil). Commonly known essential oils/scents would include lavender, rose, chamomile, pine, rosemary and eucalyptus.

While some essential oils are food grade, this article is NOT recommending internal or ingested use of oils of any kind. Essential oils are generally sold in very tiny dark glass bottles; they are tiny because they are super concentrated and a small amount can make a world of difference. For example, if you wanted to add the essential oil of lavender to your bathwater, you would not need more than 1-2 drops. Please be mindful of this, as “less is more”.

Essential oils vary in quality. Organic is the best choice as they are toxin/poison/pesticide free. Why would you want to promote deep yoga breathing of pesticides? Please be wary of synthetic commercial air fresheners; though they may smell good, they might be full of chemical toxins.

Who can use aromatherapy? There is little scientific data that aromatherapy can cure a specific condition, speed healing, prevent disease, etc. However, since most of us are not doctors, this is not our concern nor our focus. The intention of this article is simply to invite you to share aromatherapy with your students before, during or after your fitness experience.

Do **not** pour the essential oils into the pool!! Also remember that in a group exercise experience and with most gyms, etiquette is to be “fragrance free”. We have to be very mindful of respecting other individuals’ personal space; a wonderful smell to one person could be offensive to another. We also must be very sensitive regarding individuals with allergies. Even with organic essential oils, it’s best to always ask permission and use good judgment regarding ventilation.

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So what about arthritis, you ask?

TIP: Read the Arthritis section of the AEA Aquatic Fitness Professional Manual in Chapter 12 for excellent descriptions of the two most common forms – Rheumatoid Arthritis and Osteoarthritis. Read the Musculoskeletal Disease section of the AEA Aquatic Fitness Professional Manual in Chapter 12 for a list of the recommended pool temperature, depths, tempo

and specifics for Arthritis and other musculoskeletal diseases.

From the Arthritis Foundation Website and Arthritis Today magazine, I found this article, “Aromatherapy for Pain Relief” by Mary Margaret Chappell.

“Recent studies corroborate the use of aromatherapy for pain relief. Aromatherapy is effective because it works directly on the amygdala, the brain’s emotional center,” says Mehmet Oz, MD, professor of surgery at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City. “This has important consequences because the thinking part of the brain can’t inhibit the effects of the scent, meaning you feel them instantaneously.” Of the many uses of aromatherapy, pain relief is only one; anxiety reduction and rejuvenation are other common objectives.”

“Dr. Oz, a cardiovascular surgeon, studied aromatherapy to find alternative methods to expedite recovery time and reduce anxiety in heart patients. Dr. Oz and his collaborator, clinical aromatherapist Jane Buckle, PhD, recommend using 15 drops of an essential oil, such as lavender, chamomile or eucalyptus, diluted with 1 oz. (2 Tbsp.) of a “carrier” or neutral oil, such as almond, avocado or jojoba, dabbed directly on the skin. This means you literally have scented relief on you when you need it, says Dr. Oz.”

Your students might find that interesting as many may moisturize after being in the pool. Make sure you search for other aromatherapy articles at the Arthritis Foundation website. At the end of this particular article another doctor recommends “the smell of green apples” to help with other pains. I love the smell of green apples!

In the article “Is Aromatherapy Effective for Arthritis?” Dr. Wei, Clinical Director of the nationally respected Arthritis and Osteoporosis Center of Maryland, wrote:

“A form of aromatherapy used by thousands of people in the United States on a daily basis are menthol-based topical arthritis rubs.

Aromatherapy needs to be studied more intensely before it can be formally recommended as a standard treatment for arthritis. It does seem to help with symptoms in some people. There is no evidence it has any effect on slowing the progression of arthritis.”

The Japan Times Online article, “Doctors Turning to Aromatherapy for Help”, offers this lovely research:

“Nobumasa Shiba, director of orthopedic surgery at the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Hospital, became interested in aromatherapy as an alternative treatment for osteoarthritis in knee joints, which occurs when the cartilage in the joint wears away. About 1 million people in Japan have the degenerative condition.”

“To test the effectiveness and safety of aromatherapy for patients, Shiba carried out an experiment on those aged 40 or older who had had physical symptoms for more than three months. The 36 patients massage lavender oil, effective for pain, and rosemary camphor oil, to improve circulation, into their knees in the morning and evening for two weeks. Most of them said their symptoms, including pain, had lessened. It still needs to be clarified what was effective and how, but I had not expected such a good result,” Shiba said.”

If you or your students get massages, you could ask the massage technician if they would use a few drops of your favorite essential oils with the unscented massage oil base. Many massage colleges offer aromatherapy courses as well, so they may already have knowledge of the oils and their many uses. At home, the easiest idea is hot bath with essential oils. You will benefit from the warm water, which we know all about, as well as the scent of the essential oils.

The hydrosols are mostly water (the fragrance is airy and delicate) and I have never had a problem using them with my clients, students and colleagues. I am surrounded by hydrosols, in plastic dark colored small spray bottles, made from varying organic essential oils. I have some in my fitness teaching bag and my mind-body aquatic participants often ask to use them. I prefer that they spray themselves after they are out of the pool (just to be mindful of others). Sometimes at the end of the class, only at a well-ventilated or outdoor pool, if we need to have a “rosy day”, I will pass around the rose hydrosol and invite folks to spray if they would like.

If you find aromatherapy to be an enjoyable stress reliever and relaxer for you, then why not share that experience with your students? I think less stress ALWAYS feels much better. We have many participants with arthritis who seek the warm water for pain management. Aromatherapy may enhance their experience or maybe not, but it smells better than chlorine! Aromatherapy is an interesting topic of conversation and it offers organic lifestyle ideas for us and our students, both in and out of the pool.

For more information, cautions and articles you can Google, The National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy (NAHA). They have a great article titled, “Treating Fibromyalgia with Aromatherapy”. ▀

Author

Michele the Trainer loves warm clean water, from the puddle to the pool to the Pacific. She is an ACE Personal Trainer, a PADI Divemaster, and of course an AEA certified aquatic instructor. aka Mermaid de Los Angeles, she has been blessed with amazing aquatic animal encounters during her countless international SCUBA adventures, starting when she was about 15 years old. Having transformed her own body from size 40 to size 4, (the good old tried and true diet and exercise way) Michele is obsessed with fitness, health and wellness. With her oceanic connection and background, warm water fitness quickly became a passion! To share suggestions on incorporating aromatherapy into your programming or for more information on essential oils or aromatherapy, visit her website www.michelethetrainer.com or email at michele@michelethetrainer.com