

Essential Oils during Pregnancy Myths Exposed & Some Facts

by Martin Watt 2013
Extended [below](#) May 2014

Several ladies have emailed me about this issue. They have been scared about the effects on their baby after using essential oils while pregnant but only later reading about the dangers. Below I am providing some facts to dispel the common aromatherapy nonsense on this issue.

Disclaimer: If someone believes what they read elsewhere on this issue, and the natural process of miscarriage happens. I cannot accept responsibility for such an event claimed to be due to following advice given below.

The use of most essential oils during pregnancy by means of massage, or in the occasional use of diffusers should be safe. That is as long as the inhalation is not constant or in badly ventilated rooms. As with everything **the key is volume used**. During pregnancy to use essential oils internally as medicine is not a wise move. However, to have them diluted in massage should be fine. By diluted I mean to around 2% of their original concentration. Likewise a few drops in a bath should be OK. Numerous essential oils are permitted food flavours under International regulations. If they are considered safe for ingestion in foods then they are even safer when used externally. **However, beware of the many 'novel' oils now being sold that have not been tested for safety issues.** They may be safe, but without testing no one knows.

Beware of the dangerous and unscrupulous information on the many Young Living and DoTerra web sites, their distributors blogs and similar social media blogs, where they promote the use of undiluted oils. Ignore their claims of medical or other research, they take facts of no relevance to aromatherapy and then twist them to suit their marketing scams.

Ingestion of essential oils at greater levels than the small amounts allowed in food is risky for anyone but even more so during pregnancy. There are two main safety issues:

1. The potential for causing development problems in a foetus.
2. The high risk of consuming an oil that is not half as natural as the suppliers claim. As pointed out in other articles on this site, adulterated oils can contain all kinds of dangerous chemical residues.

Other precautions: It is not unusual for mothers-to-be to develop hypersensitive skin during pregnancy. Skin application of essential oils in such circumstances may trigger a skin reaction. If the skin is too sensitive it may be that a little oil in a diffuser for relaxation can be tolerated.

General comments on the misinformation over essential oils in pregnancy.

Most of the claims you will come across on aromatherapy web sites and in books relating to the dangers of essential oils in pregnancy are either inventions or corrupted science. They mostly originate from known and suspected data on the consumption of the herb in which the oils occur. **The early authors had little to no knowledge of the fundamental chemical difference between herbal preparations and essential oils.** Therefore if a herb had a reputation as an abortifacient, they just assumed the oil from the same plant would do the same. That is one of the biggest blunders made in aromatherapy.

Another error is assuming that because an essential oil is toxic if consumed, that therefore using it diluted on the skin will also cause fetal toxicity. This gets back to the question of skin absorption.

There is no sound evidence that enough of most essential oils can penetrate the skin from massage using the diluted oils, to cause systemic toxicity.

Another common scientific error is in the testing of oils and their component chemicals. Frequently the oil to be tested is applied to a piece of isolated gut or uterus from a lab animal. Then when the tissue contracts they classify the substance as an "abortifacient" and build a whole story around that unsound science.

There are always exceptions to the above of course and **there is some evidence that wintergreen and birch oils may be absorbed in dangerous volumes.** Therefore, these should not be used during pregnancy. Incidentally, neither of these products are "natural" in the same way as distilled oils. They are in fact chemicals made from processing plants.

Numerous essential oils are classed as GRAS (generally regarded as safe) for food additives by the FDA. The World Health Organisation also classify many oils as food flavours. Most of the essential oils that aromatherapists are told "not to use on pregnant women", are in reality, in small amounts, permitted food flavourings. Please note though that GRAS status is not a passport to use the oil anyway you like. It is always related to the volumes in common use in the industries concerned and at the volumes they use. These volumes can be very low compared to what some aromatherapists use.

Dangerous natural chemicals in some oils.

There is a lot of misinformation around on the dangers of some chemicals in essential oils. This misinformation often comes from National consumer safety agencies who cannot be entirely trusted on such issues. Some of them list chemicals such as d-limonene as dangerous. Well we had all better stop eating oranges then or drinking orange flavoured drinks!! The scientific world is packed with such misleading information.

Good examples of hyped dangers are:

1. **sabinyl acetate in Spanish sage.** You can test many chemicals occurring in essential oils and they will prove to be toxic when administered to mice in massive volumes. This way of testing for dangers is crazy but common. In the case of Spanish sage it is recognised as safe for human consumption as a plant extract (21 CFR section 182.20 [1982]).

Salvia lavandulifolia essential oil was tested with a sabinyl acetate content of 50%. However, the tests involved direct injection of huge doses of the chemical into the pregnant mice. Hardly surprising therefore that it caused maternal toxicity and thus abortion, but it was **not fetotoxic.** *Phytotherapy Research 2006. Volume 6 Issue 2, Pages 80 - 83.*

2. **Apiol in parsley seed,** Dill and Celery seed oils. These are commonly used in many traditional food dishes without any evidence of harm. Rarely do we hear of doctors advising pregnant ladies to avoid these foods, but of course to consume these oil during pregnancy would not be wise.

3. **Pennyroyal and Pulegone,** see the article 'Pennyroyal' in the archive for greater detail.

4. **Rose oil** is listed by many aromatherapy sources as an "emmenagogue". There is not a shed of sound evidence for this and rose oil is a permitted food flavour. Indeed the ladies in Turkey who spend hours picking the flowers consider that rose makes for a happy and healthy child.

There are numerous similar examples of nonsense based on a complete lack of knowledge, much of this is taught to aromatherapists by "approved" course providers.

Toxicity is dose dependent. It is misleading in the extreme to say that because an essential oil contains a known toxic chemical that by default the oil it occurs in is also dangerous. You must know how much is in the oil and how much does it take to cause toxicity. If we always considered such matters we would die from starvation because nearly all natural foods contain chemicals

which in isolation are toxic.

With skin application of most essential oils, chronic toxicity requires regular use at high volumes over protracted periods of time. Exceptions being Wintergreen and Sweet Birch.

With inhalation, chronic toxicity could occur if someone were foolish enough to sit in an unventilated room every day using diffusers constantly. Therefore that kind of exposure would NOT be advisable during pregnancy.

The Usefulness of Aromatherapy in Pregnancy.

Aromatherapy is an appropriate treatment for easing ailments during pregnancy. Aromatherapy massage can help relieve backache which is common as the baby grows, as well as keeping the tissues in supple state. The fragrance of the oils alone can help reduce stress, improve sleep, relieve morning sickness, etc.

During pregnancy the use of essential oils should be treated the same as medicines, if you don't need them don't use them. However, for many of the ailments that can occur during pregnancy, essential oils are a safer alternative to chemical drugs.

Summary:

To me safety is paramount, but we should look at sound evidence for and against, rather than stick to old wives tales and myths. I believe most of this stuff (except wintergreen and Birch oils) on the dangers of essential oils in pregnancy, is little more than urban rumours and corrupted bad science.

Source and copyright:

<http://www.aromamedical.org>

Errors on Internet sites

After doing a search on 'essential oils in pregnancy' I found some appalling articles written by people who either got all they know from the popular aromatherapy novels, or low quality courses. Below is one article with the errors outlined. The writer or web sites either can't be contacted or their sites are no longer serviced but are still on the Internet.

Green = my comments.

Blue = no evidence of harm from EXTERNAL use of the diluted oils and many are permitted food flavours.

“.....” = the online article.

“Aromatherapy and Pregnancy”

“There are many essential oils that need to be avoided during pregnancy. The following list contains oils that should be avoided during pregnancy and oils that are recommended for use during pregnancy. Use of essential oils should be extremely limited or avoided during the first trimester of pregnancy, but has many wonderful uses in the last two trimesters and especially during labour.”

“OILS TO AVOID DURING PREGNANCY

Basil, Cedar Wood, Cinnamon **which?**, Clary sage (during labor), Clove, Cypress (after 5 months), Fennel, Hyssop, Jasmine (during labor), **-correct**, Juniper, Lemongrass, Myrrh, Parsley and Pennyroyal.” **Nearly all these claims are corruptions from herbal medicine when it is taken internally. Some are permitted in foods (at low levels of use). No limitations on the consumption of those foods during pregnancy are required. Therefore, external use of the diluted essential oil at or below the same levels of use in foods, should cause no problem to a foetus.**

OILS RECOMMENDED DURING PREGNANCY

“The following oils will be comfortable for using during pregnancy. As always, use caution if you have allergies or a family history of allergies. If you feel you may be allergic to oil, do a patch test first. Good oils for pregnancy include”:

Bergamot, Chamomile, **which?** Cypress (after 5 mos.)**stupid**, Eucalyptus, Frankincense, Geranium (avoid in early pregnancy)**stupid**, Grapefruit, Lavender. Lemon, Mandarin, Neroli, Patchouli, Petitgrain, Rosewood, Sandalwood and Tangerine If you are currently pregnant and have been using any of the essential oils that need to be avoided, but are not experiencing any bleeding or cramping, then there most likely is nothing wrong. However, it is strongly encouraged you to consult your doctor or midwife and discontinue use of the "to be avoided" essential oils. “ **99.99% of Doctors know nothing about these issues.**

“Aromatherapy Benefits for Pregnancy”

“Listed below are some of the **benefits and therapeutic effects** of the essential oils recommended for use during pregnancy”:

Bergamot: Analgesic-not true, antiseptic, antidepressant, uplifting, and refreshing. Helpful for cystitis during pregnancy-not true.

Chamomile:which? Antiseptic, analgesic-not true, anti-inflammatory and antispasmodic. Soothes pain from muscular aches, headaches, toothaches and Indigestion-not true..

Cypress (ok after 5 mos.)-not true, Antiseptic, antispasmodic, astrigent and diuretic. Helpful for Varicose veins, hemorrhoids and swollen ankles. **All nonsense based on herbal use NOT the essential oil.**

Eucalyptus: Antiseptic, antibiotic,-not true, analgesic, anti-inflammatory, antiviral.-not true, Helpful with respiratory congestion.

Frankincense: Antiseptic, astrigent.-not true, sedative, warming

Geranium (ok after 3 mos.)-not true, Antiseptic, antidepressant, astrigent, -not true, refreshing, uplifting. Eases aching legs and is good for poor circulation. **nonsense**

Grapefruit: Astringent,-not true, digestive aid, lymphatic stimulant. Helps with Water retention. **All nonsense.**

Lavender: Antiseptic, antibiotic,-not true, analgesic, antidepressant, healing, Relaxing. Helps soothe aches and pains of pregnancy, encourages cell renewal and helps with fluid retention-nonsense.

Lemon: Antiseptic, antibacterial, antifungal, astrigent-nonsense. stimulant, Tonic. Useful as an inhalant for morning sickness and in Massage for varicose veins. **Dangerous**

Mandarin: Antiseptic, refreshing, tonic, mild relaxant. Can ease fluid retention in leg and ankle massages. **The massage does that NOT essential oils.**

Neroli: Antiseptic, antidepressant, antispasmodic, anti-inflammatory, Relaxing. Useful in pregnancy to promote healthy skin cell Regeneration and for easing nervous tension.

Patchouli: Antiseptic, antidepressant, anti-inflammatory, nerve sedative. Eases confusion, indecision and apathy.

Petitgrain: Antiseptic, antidepressant, sedative, refreshing, tonic. Helpful in dealing with pre or postpartum depression.

Rosewood: Antiseptic, sedative-doubtful

Sandalwood: Antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, antidepressant, sedative. Helpful for cystitis during pregnancy. No sound evidence and as most is adulterated this is hazardous.

Tangerine: Antispasmodic, lymphatic stimulant-nonsense, calming, sedative. Helps to prevent stretch marks.

Tea Tree: Antibiotic, antiseptic, antifungal, antiviral-the oil is not, disinfectant. Can be used to treat thrush during pregnancy.

Ylang Ylang: Antiseptic, antidepressant, aphrodisiac, sedative, lowers blood Pressure.-evidence? Restorative when overworked or tense.