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Essential Oils: Hoax or Hope?



While celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow have subscribed to Eastern philosophy and the use of essential oils for ailments for years, the wave of legitimacy among the larger population has just begun to take hold. Thanks to two companies, Young Living (established well before its time in 1994) and doTerra (founded in 2008) you may be trying essential oils the next time you are feeling blue or have dry skin.



all aspects of wellness, from mindfulness to exercise to sleep. As our focus on self-care has grown, so has our curiosity about essential oils. The business is booming, according to Grand View Research, with 2016 global sales of \$6.63 billion.

As a wellness devotee, I was intrigued about essential oils. But could I overcome the lack of FDA approval? Or would I be persuaded by the fact that essential oils are not a fad; they've been used throughout history to influence health.

I'M IN. WHERE DO I BEGIN?

There are hundreds of singular oils and blends. Couple that with the myriad forms (roller balls, capsules, diffusers), and you may find incorporating essential oils into your life like a science test for which you failed to study. The hardest part? The first step.

Here are some irrefutable facts:

- Essential oils are concentrated hydrophobic (read: do not mix with water) liquids containing volatile aroma compounds from plants.
- Essential oils enter the body in one of three ways: through the skin, through the nose, or through the stomach.
- Not all essential oils are created equal. They must be purchased from a reputable company with rigorous (in many cases third-party) testing and quality resources to be effective. Cheap oils from drugstores and groceries, while fragrant, are not therapeutic. "Fragrance oil" from even the most health-conscious stores is just that — a fragrance.

Be warned, says Kirsten King, clinical aromatherapist and founder of essential oil-based **OILLE skin care**, "While studying to become a certified clinical aromatherapist, I learned that about 90 to 95 percent of essential oils on the market today are adulterated."

For my exploration, I chose doTerra products. Having researched the company mission and legitimate focus on safety and education for "a wide range of emotional and physical wellness applications," I



Beyond an educational sales pitch, I found the doTerra rep presented compelling reasons for even considering essential oils. Given our uncontrollable toxic surroundings (pollution, climate change, and genetically engineered food), my well-being relies on taking control of the things I can. And regardless of age, being proactive in wellness leads to a richer, longer “health span” (as coined by Dr. Sara Gottfried, the Harvard-educated women’s hormone expert, and proponent of essential oils). doTerra’s 5 million customers just might be on to something.

The best advice I received was to take it slow. Initially, identify where you can easily initiate a change. Many people tackle cleaning supplies first, as you can eliminate toxic, chemical-laden cleaning products from your life while also enhancing efficacy. Once comfortable with essential oils in dish



I took doTerra's alternative route, introducing only instrumental single oils (lavender, lemon, frankincense, melaluca, and peppermint) and key blends (Breath Respiratory, Deep Blue Soothing, DigestZen Digestive, and On Guard Protective).

Within a month, I began incorporating the nine essential oils into my daily life without any upheaval. I now find comfort sleeping with lavender in a diffuser. I often use melaluca (aka tea tree oil) on cuts. Lemon is a decidedly aromatic way to refresh unwashed and/or dry hair. I reach for Breath for a mood boost, while peppermint is spectacular for a stuffy nose. OnGuard has helped ward off winter viruses, while Deep Blue is a go-to for muscle aches after CrossFit. When combined with coconut oil, the power of lavender and frankincense creates soothing moisturizer for my dry winter skin. And to think I was unsure how these essential oils would work for me.

But the overarching question is *Have I improved my wellness?* If I could quantify improved quality of life, then yes. I no longer feel I am compromising. I can have deeper sleep, shinier hair, a calmer spirit, and more hydrated skin without fillers or toxins. All the while pre-empting winter blahs and a virus.

REGULATION FREE IS NOT FOR ME.

There are multiple paths toward wellness, and for many this journey does not include essential oils. Without FDA involvement or regulation, those opposed will simply not be swayed.

The controversy surrounding essential oils has merit, as the FDA is consistently forced to stress guidelines and restrictions about marketing health claims. "No natural health product marketing can say it is intended to treat, prevent, cure, or mitigate any disease ... even when there is scientific research to back up the validity of the claims."

Regardless of the law, you hear anecdotes. People claim to have overcome everything from Lyme disease to cancer with essential oils. Overzealous claims make many steer clear, or lose faith if they'd been considering use, despite the positive attributes essential oils may bring.

Essential oil companies feel misunderstood, as their products are simply plants. "It's the same as eating a salad," said one doTerra representative. Cynics refute, "They're not *essential* to your health in any way. They're not essential vitamins and minerals."



Ultimately, fearmongering keeps essential oils from overcoming negative stigma. A recent [**New York Times** story](#) identified essential oils as the sole source of negative skin issues. The skin care specialist, who coincidentally had the ultimate authoritative background of cosmetic chemistry and plant science, didn't intend to create an "anti-essential oil movement" as she launched her skin care brand, but with this negative feedback, the ground swell heightened.

No matter the rationale, the barrier is too high for critics. They can't fathom a wellness connection, preferring to keep their well-being in the hands of evidence-based conventional practices and professionals.

As Arthur L. Caplan, founding director of NYU School of Medicine's Division of Medical Ethics, has said, "... testimonials are not evidence and ancient and/or popular does not mean a therapy is effective." He reinforces that essential oils are just another crazy alternative in which, "custom, cultural beliefs, and fairy dust are deemed sufficient."

THE ESSENTIALS

Whatever your verdict — yay or nay — it's critical to educate yourself about your well-being and understand that it's hard to go wrong when you choose products that you feel confident can help you look and feel healthy as you age.

PHOTOS: TRINETTE REED, COURTESY OF DOTERRA

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