

Essential Oils in Skincare: HELPFUL OR HAZARDOUS?

You've probably noticed the upsurge in unscented skincare lines of late, especially in brands presenting a cosmeceutical approach. This new style of skincare formulation has mirrored rising consumer awareness (and possibly incidence as well) of allergies and sensitivities to foods, chemicals, environmental factors and the products we use in our homes and on our skin. It seems that many LOHAS (lifestyles of health and sustainability) consumers who want to be sure of avoiding synthetics, those with highly sensitive complexions and experienced spa-goers seeking therapies that will yield immediate and rewarding results are opting for products without scents. However, in this move away from fragrances, are consumers missing out on the powerful topical, penetrative and psychoactive (crossing the blood-brain barrier) benefits of natural essential oils? Here, in our first Forum, two product formulators discuss the pros and cons of the use of essential oils in skincare.



Farida Irani, a pioneer in Ayurveda aromatherapy in Australia, uses plant essences in her Subtle Energies formulations that are based on the traditions of the ancient healing sciences from India.



There is a growing trend of belief that unscented products are better for the skin. However, time-tested aromatics should not be forgotten, as they play a vital role in spa therapy. Fragrance-free ranges do not have the unique attributes of essential oils and their natural fragrance. Saundaram, the beauty section of the eight branches of medicine in Ayurveda, clearly states how aromatics can help the mind, body, skin and emotions.

Almost all essential oils have antiviral, antifungal and antibacterial qualities to a greater or lesser degree. We, as aromatherapists, like to call them as probiotic or eubiotic, which means cell promoters. They

do not destroy the natural flora of the body but enhance our immune system through application on the skin (which allows the oils to penetrate into the bloodstream). They are the very essence the prana chi or life force of the plant and by using them for beauty and health we are synergising this prana or essence of the plant with our own.

The oils go through the stratum corneum, the protective skin layer, and penetrate through the hair follicles and sweat glands into the blood stream. In acute conditions, a change can be noticed within 48 hours. For example, clinical research has shown that using cooling oils such as mogra, gul heena, sandalwood or wild turmeric in a cooling base oil of brahmi or amla, has not only seen the inflammation of rosacea reduced but in most cases treated successfully. Oils such as German chamomile, cedarwood, lavender, geranium, palmarosa and Indian rosewood can all be useful for conditions such as psoriasis, dermatitis and eczema—working both topically and from within.

Essential oils are active ingredients in skincare that affect the skin as either astringents, stimulants (increasing circulation), preventatives against infection or disease or hydrators. As some oils are hydrating and others are more astringent, when correctly blended, essential oils help create a balance to maintain various skin types and conditions.

It should be noted as we discuss uses for essential oils, that we are referring to these oils as active ingredients blended with appropriate bases such as cold-pressed vegetable oils, natural creams and gels, etc. Generally, essential oils should not be used neat topically and I always recommend consulting a qualified aromatherapist when treating conditions.

Essential oils, like all organic compounds, are made up of hydrocarbon molecules and can further be classified as terpenes, alcohols, esters, aldehydes, ketones and phenols. These chemical components give them their unique therapeutic properties. Essential oils have many major and minor chemical constituents, which can be over a hundred components or more. While the major constituents of an essential oil can be replicated synthetically, the trace elements are like the blueprint and cannot be duplicated. Therefore, synthetically duplicated oil, for example lavender oil, will not have the same therapeutic properties or aroma as the natural and pure essential oil.

For example, lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) is regarded as the 'Mother of all Oils'. Lavender owes its unique aroma to a high content of linalyl acetate. Linalyl acetate is an ester and therefore is soothing and cooling to the

skin and is very effective on scar tissue, especially burns. It also has a high content of linalool, an alcohol that is very toning and energising for the skin. It is therefore antiseptic, relaxing, anti-inflammatory, a tissue repairer and an analgesic. But even within the same species of plant a variation of chemical constituents can be found. For example, French lavender grown and harvested in the foothills of Kashmir in India and Pakistan was tested against 70 commercial grade French lavenders. The Kashmiri lavender, due to variations in climate, altitude, etc., was found to contain more linalool and linalyl acetate and less camphor than the others.

Mogra (*Jasminum sambac*) is known as the 'Queen of Jasmine', an oil of joy, used in spiritual worship and known for its sensuality. A cytophylactic, the oil promotes cell renewal and stimulates tissue growth and reproduction. It repairs scar tissue and damaged skin cells. Some of its chemical constituents are benzyl acetate, benzyl benzoate, methyl benzoate, methyl anthranilate, nerol, eugenol, benzyl alcohol, jasmnine, cis-jasmone, indol (which gives it the red colour) and linalool. Due to these constituents it is an excellent anti-ageing, anti-scarring, analgesic, soothing, cooling, anti-inflammatory oil. It is ideal for rosacea and eczema, a powerful antiseptic and great for anxiety and depression. Its exquisite aroma is not as sweet as *Jasminum grandiflorum* and is particularly beneficial in skincare because of its revitalising and toning properties due to its astringent nature. It serves both dry and oily



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skin as it works on balancing the sebaceous glands. Very good for facial skin and getting rid of fine lines.

While some of the chemical constituents of essential oils can cause irritation to the face, these same chemical constituents can be effective for body and musculoskeletal issues. Some of these include cinnamon leaf, tulasi, black pepper and ajowan. Additionally, some reactions to fragrant skincare can be due to the fact that the oils used are synthetic rather than natural. One must do thorough research into the brands to investigate the ingredients used, where they are sourced from and how they are formulated. This applies not only to aromatic ranges but also for cosmeceutical ranges—what appears to be natural may not always be. In fact, in Ayurveda we say, “What we cannot eat through the mouth we do not apply on skin,” as the skin is the largest organ of the body and it tends to eat everything that we put on it. So if what we put on the skin has a systemic effect on our body it is best to use skincare that is as pure as possible.

The emotional importance of essential oils should not be underplayed either. People do not realise that many skin conditions are triggered by stress and emotional instability. Using certain essential oils as part of a daily skincare routine can have a double purpose—actively maintaining the skin’s condition and keeping the emotions balanced by alleviating stress. As aromatics work on the mind, endorphins rise giving us a peaceful feeling and automatically the fine lines on the face ease up.

With the trend of spas in Australia heading towards the use of fragrance-free ranges, one must not forget the time-tested ability of aromatics to increase client satisfaction. I have found the trend to be in reverse at destination and resort spas internationally: many of the highly reputed hotel and spa brands insist on having aromatics play a key role in their spa, whether it be in massage oils or skincare.

Grace Culhaci became a skincare formulator after suffering from highly sensitive skin herself. She is CEO and founder of Pure & Green Organics—a range of organic, vegan skincare. She creates both fragrance-free and essential oil-scented lines.



One in six people now have an environmental illness, a skin or food reaction or multiple chemical sensitivity. Fragrances, whether natural or chemical, can trigger reactions, so we developed our unscented range due to that. But we also wanted to have options for those who like fragrance. We try to take a balanced approach. We don’t want to decide everything for people. Some people prefer products with a scent, so we need to cater to them too.

Our range of products comes in citrus, lavender and unscented. Citrus essential oils can cause pigmentation, so people who are outdoors a lot may prefer to choose lavender instead, just in case, but most people working indoors wouldn’t have a reaction to the small amount of citrus in the products.

We abide by the International Fragrance Association (ifraorg.org) Standards for formulators, which complies with the EU Safety Assessment. Under that framework, use of any kind of fragrance material is documented and regulated in 12 categories, depending on

Under International Fragrance Association Standards (IFRA, ifraorg.org) there are a number of chemical components that are restricted for use in fragrance and skincare due to potential allergic reactions within the population. IFRA has developed a category definitions (such as leave on, rinse off, room spray, candles) with allowable limits for each allergen component. This system has been adopted by the EU and must be adhered to for any skincare or fragrance product sold there.

what it is being used for. This framework prescribes safe maximum amounts of fragrance ingredients based on documented medical presentations of allergen reactions.

When the Standard became law in the EU it was seen by some to be slanted against the use of natural therapies, but natural can be very strong; it can be toxic. I feel the Standard is an excellent guide for formulators using fragrances. The maximums have been worked out based on the fact that sensitivities develop over time with everyday use; an allowance has been built in for what someone using it on an ongoing basis can tolerate. This is not actually a requirement in Australia, but we researched world standards and decided that the EU Safety Assessment alongside the IFRA Standards were the best practice guidelines to work from. In fact, under the IFRA guidelines you’re not allowed to say “fragrance-free”, so we use the term “unscented”.

I’m not in favour of using essential oil directly on skin in undiluted state. In terms of UV damage, there is a risk if essential oils are used neat, however they’re much safer in carrier oils and it also depends on whether the product in question is designed to be rinsed off or left on. We only use lemongrass in rinse-off products because it can cause photosensitivity. Citrus is the main culprit—bergapten is the chemical found in many other citrus essential oils that causes phototoxicity. However, there are bergapten-free bergamot and citrus oils that don’t cause photo-sensitisation.

Another key aspect of the IFRA Code of Practice is to keep it simple—in our products we only use one scent. When there are a lot of fragrance elements it’s hard for consumers to work out what they’ve reacted to, and often they will avoid all of them even though it may be only just one.

Recently we added an allergen indicator to our product labels. This lists all essential oil components as well as other ingredients that may cause a reaction—preservatives in organic and natural products are often essential oils. We want consumers to be able to make an informed choice about the products they use.

This is part of our customer service ethos—we’d like people to be able to determine what exactly they’re allergic to if they have a reaction, and then they can avoid it from other sources. For example, orange oil and peppermint oil are also widely used in food, so someone may be eating those same ingredients and unknowingly enhancing their allergic reaction. If they are aware of it they can then eliminate it from their diet as well.” 🌸

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