

## Lavender – nature’s aid to stress relief

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The essential oil of lavender (in particular, of *Lavandula augustifolia*) has been recognised for its healing properties since ancient times, and it has been used traditionally to treat many disorders, including:

- insomnia
- skin complaints, such as dermatitis, acne, allergies, insect bites, mild burns, athlete's foot and general wounds
- gastrointestinal disorders, such as flatulence
- pain, such as headaches, rheumatism, muscular aches, labour pains and period pains.<sup>1</sup>

Lavender was used extensively during World War I whenever medical supplies became scarce, to both prevent infection and relieve pain. The aroma of lavender has been reported to be calming,<sup>2</sup> and is thought to be particularly useful in stressful situations.<sup>1</sup>

Until recently, evidence supporting the efficacy of lavender essential oil in these conditions has tended to be largely anecdotal, but medical research is now beginning to show that this oil may indeed have medicinal properties. A recent review of the biological activities of lavender essential oil concluded that there is “both scientific and clinical data that support the traditional uses of lavender”.<sup>3</sup>

### **Lavender essential oil prevents infection**

Lavender essential oil has been shown to have antiseptic, antibiotic and antifungal activity,<sup>4-7</sup> and also to have efficacy in the laboratory against bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics (e.g. methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* [MRSA]).<sup>6</sup>

### **Lavender essential oil aids insomnia and quality of sleep**

Lavender aromatherapy was found to improve sleep in older hospitalised patients, and reduced the need for night sedation.<sup>8</sup> Massage with lavender essential oil improved quality of sleep in patients with rheumatoid arthritis.<sup>9</sup>

### **Lavender essential oil reduces anxiety**

Lavender aromatherapy massage has been shown to reduce levels of anxiety in intensive care patients,<sup>10</sup> and the aroma of lavender decreased anxiety in patients undergoing haemodialysis.<sup>11</sup>

### **Lavender essential oil relieves pain**

Massage with lavender oil reduced the perception of pain in patients with chronic rheumatoid arthritis,<sup>9</sup> and in women who had given birth, lavender baths reduced perineal pain and discomfort 3–5 days post-natally.<sup>12</sup>

### **Lavender essential oil controls alopecia (hair loss)**

A combination of lavender, rosemary, cedarwood and thyme essential oils has been reported to improve hair growth in patients with alopecia.<sup>13</sup>

### **Lavender essential oil aids indigestion**

Lavender is currently recommended for the treatment of indigestion and nervous intestinal discomfort by the German Federal Institute for Drugs and Medical Devices Commission E, a committee made up of scientists, toxicologists, doctors and pharmacists formed by the German government in 1978.<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusion**

These findings still require further investigation, and research into the medical properties of lavender and other essential oils continues. The use of aromatherapy can not be recommended as a substitute for medical care and, if taken for medical reasons, this should be under the guidance of a qualified aromatherapist. Nevertheless, it is slowly becoming evident that many of the traditional medicinal properties attributed to lavender could be based in scientific fact.