

THE SLIPPERY TRUTH

We scoured the research on these popular natural remedies, hoping to create a handy guide for all the mama oil lovers out there.

But the more we investigated, the more concerned we became. If you have oils at home, we urge you to read on.

by **KRISTEN MASCIA** / photographs by **CLAIRE BENOIST**

ABOUT ESSENTIAL OILS



ESSENTIAL OILS ARE POTENTIALLY TOXIC AND RARELY COME WITH CHILDPROOF CAPS.



IT DIDN'T TAKE very long for Jessica G., a mom of two from California, to get hooked on doTerra essential oils. At bathtime, she found that adding a few drops of lavender oil to an ultrasonic diffuser—a device that disperses the scent through the air—seemed to help her two girls settle down for the evening. And dabbing oils on her pulse points before bed eased her own anxiety. Following the wide-ranging advice on the private Facebook group of the woman who'd sold her the oils, Jessica rolled a blend on her kids' feet to boost immunity, applied peppermint oil to their foreheads to reduce fever, and rubbed eucalyptus diluted in coconut oil on their chests to clear their stuffy noses.

So when her 5-year-old fell ill with both croup and a double-ear infection, and a member of the group suggested rubbing basil oil on the sole of her daughter's foot, Jessica figured she'd try it. But within 15 minutes, her daughter had a bright-red burn on her skin and was howling in pain. Jessica frantically googled remedies—and couldn't find a single authoritative source. "That was my lightbulb moment," she recalls. "I realized that all these oil protocols had no scientific backing at all."

Her daughter's burn faded within days, but Jessica's guilt lasted much longer. She learned that basil is one of many oils that can irritate the skin. Now she's part of a growing group of moms raising the alarm about the dangers of essential

oils—liquid extracts from plants and flowers that are potent enough to do real harm when misused. "You really have to know what you're doing," says Jessica. But when there is so much shady info about oils floating around out there, that's not easy to do.

The Nature of Oils

They may be trending, but essential oils are older than dirt. Centuries before the magi brought gifts of frankincense and myrrh to you-know-who in the manger, ancient Egyptians were using oils for culinary, cosmetic, and medicinal purposes. Different from the oils we consume and cook with, essential oils contain the highly concentrated "quintessence" or core quality of the aromatic plants or flowers from which they are derived. It's the unique thing that makes lemongrass lemongrass, makes basil basil, and makes rose rose. Even if you don't own a diffuser, you've been exposed to teensy doses; the scent that wafts up as you peel an orange comes from oils in the rind.

However, just because oils originate in Mother Nature doesn't mean that they're gentle. "There are plants that can kill you," says Kelly Johnson-Arbor, M.D., a medical toxicologist and co-medical director of the National Capital Poison Center. Wintergreen, for example, contains an active ingredient related to aspirin and can cause confusion and seizures if ingested. Essential oils are not regulated by the FDA in the same way that common over-the-counter drugs are, which means they're not rigorously tested and approved for safety or efficacy, cautions *Parents* advisor Jennifer Shu, M.D., a pediatrician in Atlanta. Although oils are traditionally considered to be cosmetics, not medical treatments, they are volatile organic compounds composed of aromatic chemicals. (Just in case you were wondering, CBD oil, which is extracted from the hemp plant, isn't considered to be an essential oil. And its use is a whole other issue.)

Oil makers usually include a disclaimer on their website, packaging, and marketing materials that says products are "not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease."

However, the FDA has previously issued warnings to two essential-oil makers whose consultants claimed their oils could treat Ebola and other conditions. The companies, multilevel marketers doTerra and Young Living, manufacture much of the essential oil sold in the U.S.

The Internet is rife with dubious and potentially dangerous essential-oil advice. Frankincense doesn't lead to "higher levels of consciousness," for example, but that's a baffling nugget on the website of a private school for children with autism. A concerned mother tipped us off to a recipe on Pinterest for a DIY oil supplement said to have helped a 7-year-old boy with cerebral palsy take steps without his walker. Oils will not cure cerebral palsy, but they could make your child ill if ingested.

These aren't hollow warnings: Children are actually getting hurt. Poison-center calls about essential-oil exposures have more than doubled in recent years, soaring from 10,729 in 2012 to 23,390 in 2017. (The numbers are likely even higher, as poisonings are chronically underreported.) In 2017, 15,249 of the calls concerned children ages 5 and under—which is alarming, but not totally surprising since essential oils are allowed to be sold without childproof caps.

Welcome to the slippery world of essential oils. Whether you're already dabbling or thinking about giving them a try, here's what you must know.

Scents and Sensibility

Even though aromatherapy has been used for thousands of years to alleviate pain, quell anxiety, and promote relaxation, scientists still don't fully understand how it works. Different scents may benefit mood by activating feel-good memories, says Cora Collette Breuner, M.D., a pediatrician at Seattle Children's Hospital, who uses oil aromatherapy with some of her patients. "It's super-individual. Some people find lemon invigorating, while chamomile helps others relax."

The big difference between the essential oils that occur naturally in a

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food versus the oils you can buy in little brown vials is their potency. It takes a dozen lemons to produce a teeny-tiny bottle of lemon essential oil. That's why using them safely is all about the dose, says Wendy Weber, Ph.D., a naturopath who heads up a research branch at the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, part of the National Institutes of Health. Diffusing a very small amount of oil for a short period of time is generally considered "quite safe" for adults, she says.

All of that said, different rules apply for diffusing oils around kids. Babies' lungs are much more sensitive than ours, and any type of aromatherapy could cause breathing trouble and even put them into respiratory distress. Peppermint, eucalyptus, and rosemary oils are often recommended online for congestion, but they can inflame infants' and toddlers' narrow airways. Children who have asthma shouldn't ever be exposed to diffused oil, cautions Diana Balekian, M.D., a pediatric allergist in North Andover, Massachusetts.

Running a diffuser in a poorly ventilated room or for too long can potentially pose problems for anyone. Lea Jacobson, a Certified Clinical Aromatherapist who maintains the website UsingEosSafely.com, advises diffusing for no more than ten minutes at a time. "Short intervals are most effective because the initial whiffs of an aroma are what initiate your body's response," Jacobson says. Always start with the lowest amount of oil recommended in your diffuser's

instruction manual. Each type of diffuser works differently, so follow your machine's instructions carefully.

Serious Concerns

You should be suspicious of anyone who tries to sell you on the benefits of oils as miracle skin treatments or oral supplements. Although there has been some research done on adults, scientists still don't know enough about how oils affect children's developing bodies. A study from National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, for example, suggested that topical use of lavender and tea-tree oils may disrupt the endocrine system, which researchers theorized could lead to breast growth in adolescent boys.

Children should never ingest essential oils or have undiluted oil applied to

their skin unless it's under the direct supervision of a medical doctor, says Dr. Shu. Although you can easily find advice online about using oils to treat eczema, don't ever apply even diluted oil to cracked or blistered skin, or to the sensitive membranes in the eyelids, nose, mouth, or vagina. Lime, oil of bergamot (a type of orange), and other citrus oils can aggravate skin in both kids and adults, making it more susceptible to sunburn.

Despite doctors' cautions, many oil makers have launched product lines featuring lotions and diluted oil roll-ons for babies and kids in the last few years. They are touted as gentle, but be wary. "Infant skin is more likely to absorb any product," says Rajani Katta, M.D., a Houston dermatologist. "I would approach essential-oil baby-



A Dose of Caution

Jessica G. is also a doula and a lactation consultant, and she felt similarly blindsided after her scare with basil oil. "I just wanted to know what's safe and what's not, but that information is so hard to find," she says. She scaled back on her family's oil use, but another pair of incidents two years ago turned her off for good.

She'd made a house call to a first-time mom who'd been encouraged by an oil seller to put basil and fennel oils on her breasts to increase her milk supply. Jessica was shocked: The woman's breasts and her 3-day-old infant's face were bright red and raw. Then she saw a Facebook

We Fact-Checked the Rumors

These false claims are getting too much buzz. Here's the honest-to-goodness truth.

WHAT YOU'VE HEARD:
A rash from an oil is a sign that your body is detoxing.

THE REAL DEAL: Girl, that's cray. It's contact dermatitis, a sign that your skin doesn't like what you're putting on it. In the event of swelling, redness, or rash, give the oil a rest and call your derm—or pediatrician, if it's your kid who's having the reaction—ASAP.

WHAT YOU'VE HEARD:
Essential oils are an alternative to antibiotics for common infections like strep or earaches.

THE REAL DEAL: Say whaaaaat? While some essential oils may have microbial and antifungal properties, there's not a scrap of evidence that says they're safe or effective for treating infections. Especially

when it's your child who's sick, be safe and dial the doc.

WHAT YOU'VE HEARD:
Essential oils are nontoxic.

THE REAL DEAL: As with many medicines, they are distilled from plants, roots, leaves, and bark, and in high doses, can be as dangerous as anything else in your medicine cabinet. Keep oils well away from little hands. If the vials you buy come with twist-off caps, you should consider transferring the contents into child-safe bottles. Keep them locked up or in the back of a high shelf in your medicine cabinet.

WHAT YOU'VE HEARD:
Diffusing can cleanse the air.

THE REAL DEAL: Essential oils are made up of potent chemicals

that create an aroma. "Emitting more of those chemicals doesn't clean indoor air but rather masks odors," notes Hugo Destailats, Ph.D., deputy leader of the Indoor Environment Group at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, in Berkeley, California. If you want to rid your home of an icky smell, run an air purifier with a HEPA filter.

WHAT YOU'VE HEARD:
It's safe to make and take your own oral oil supplements.

THE REAL DEAL: Not so fast. When full-strength oils come into contact with the delicate mucous membranes in your mouth, esophagus, and intestines, they can trigger nausea, vomiting, indigestion, and irritation of the stomach lining, and also interfere with the effects of other medications.

care products with a lot of skepticism until there have been studies." Older kids who have food allergies or skin sensitivities are also more likely to develop reactions to products with oils. "Redness or a rash is a sign that the immune system recognizes chemicals in the oils as foreign invaders," says Dr. Katta. (Call Poison Control at 800-222-1222 if you're ever concerned. Swelling of the face, trouble breathing, slowed heart rate, disorientation, and excessive drowsiness can all be signs of toxic exposure and warrant immediate medical attention.)

If you're considering using oils at bathtime, remember that they'll stay on the surface of the water. A few years ago, Laetitia Shelton, Ph.D., then a federal research scientist in Wyndmoor, Pennsylvania, decided to put a few drops of tea-tree oil into her 4-year-old son's bath. "I'd read online that it could help with rashes," she says. As soon as she added the oil to the water, he turned red from head to toe and started screaming. She scooped him up and washed him with soap and clean water, but the experience was an eye-opener. "I assumed that people selling oils have credentials and safety training, but few do," she says. "Even though I'm a scientist, I wasn't thinking about safety. I didn't realize there could be a danger."

post recommending oil for a baby's circumcision site. "There's no evidence that oils can help a wound heal, and parents were being told to put certain blends on a tiny baby's genitals? No way," Jessica says. "I was done."

Since then, she has been speaking out about her misgivings and the misinformation being spread on social media. "I've lost friends over it," she admits. "But I've also heard from a lot of moms who've come out of the woodwork with their own stories." These days, whenever she reads about bogus claims (including a recent comment that clary-sage oil could help cure uterine and ovarian fibroids), she urges other moms, "Please, don't listen to this."

The bottom line is that it's crucial to be careful if you decide to use essential oils. Store them well out of reach of kids, and take any recommendation that you find online with a heaping shakerful of salt. "You don't want to experiment on your kids," says Dr. Katta. "It's just not worth the risk." ❌



WHY IS EVERYONE SELLING OIL?
For the facts about multilevel marketing, hover your phone's camera over the smart code.