

aromatic HEALING™

using essential oils for health

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Since school is out this month, I thought we'd take a break from our discussion of essential oils and our emotions. In this month's newsletter, I'd like to cover a topic that is rarely discussed at length: carrier oils.

Since I am not a physician, I do not diagnose or prescribe. If you are pregnant or under a physician's care, consult your doctor before using the oils or supplements. The information I share with you in this newsletter is from using essential oils for me and my family to our benefit.

Carrier Oils

When I first began using essential oils, I was told that I didn't need to dilute them. Consequently, I never paid much attention to carrier oil. Interestingly enough, even in massage therapy school, there as no discussion of carrier oils!

What I have since learned is that there are indeed many times when diluting an essential oil in carrier oil is important and that carrier oils can enhance or detract from the therapeutic effect of the essential oil if not selected thoughtfully.

Carrier Oil Basics

When I refer to carrier oil, I am talking about vegetable oils as opposed to mineral oils. Unlike essential oils, carrier oils are not distilled from plants. Instead, they are usually pressed or expressed from the nut or seed of the plant. Vegetable oils are fatty oils and are often used in cooking, baking and other food preparation activities. The explosion of interest in creating healthier diets has given us important information regarding the properties of vegetable oils.

Just a few years ago there was a movement in the nutritional profession to eliminate all fat from our diets. What we found is that in doing so, we created just as much harm as too much fat. Our bodies need essential fatty acids contained in fatty oils to maintain our health. They are called "essential" because we literally cannot live without them.

Essential Fatty Acids

Fatty acids are the major building blocks of fat in our bodies. They are important sources of energy for us. In addition, fatty acids are the major structural component of membranes that surround the subcellular organelles in our cells. As such, fatty acids are critical for health. Two important essential fatty acids are linolenic and linoleic acids.

Linoleic Acid

Linoleic acid is an essential fatty acid that is used by our bodies to produce gamma linolenic acid (GLA). Difficiencies in linolenic acid can lead to: eczema, loss of hair, liver degeneration, susceptibility to infection or poor wound healing.

Linolenic Acid

Linolenic acid is another critical essential fatty acid. Our bodies use linolenic acid to prevent blood clots, reduce triglycerides in blood and to reduce blood pressure. Deficiencies of linolenic

acid can cause muscle weakness, lack of coordination, tingling of arms and legs and vision problems.

To maintain our health, we need 5 grams of both linolenic and linolenic acid daily.

Gamma Linolenic Acid (GLA)

When I first began to study carrier oils, I was amazed to find out about gamma linolenic acid or GLA. I had no idea that GLA was so critical to our health. In short, GLA affects much of the enzyme activity in our bodies, including the production of prostaglandins. Prostaglandins are hormone-like substances that regulate our blood pressure, cholesterol, inflammation, clotting as well as the production of estrogen and progesterone.

GLA can be found in certain carrier oils, or can be synthesized by our bodies from linolenic acid. Research has shown that the following can inhibit our body from producing GLA:

- ❧ Diet rich in saturated fats
- ❧ Consumption of alcohol
- ❧ Diabetes
- ❧ Age
- ❧ Lack of zinc, magnesium and vitamin B
- ❧ Viral infections, radiation, cancer
- ❧ Stress.

Two carrier oils that are rich in GLA are evening primrose and borage oils.

Commercial Carrier Oil Production

When discussing carrier oils, I feel it is important to talk about how carrier oils are produced. Most vegetable oils produced for commercial applications (cooking oils, food preparation, etc.) are cooked prior to being

expeller pressed. The reason for cooking the seed or nut prior to pressing is that the heat helps to break down the cellular membranes containing the oil. This makes the pressing operation faster and more "efficient". The problem with cooking the nuts and seeds prior to pressing is that, in addition to destroying the cellular membrane, many of the vitamins, minerals and other components of the oil are also destroyed.

In addition to cooking the nuts and seeds, commercial oils also "refine" the vegetable oil, many manufacturers, refine the vegetable oil by such additional practices as de-gumming, refining, bleaching, deodorizing and preservative processes. These additional processes continue to remove many of the beneficial components of the vegetable oil. These processes are done in order to extend the shelf life of the vegetable oil.

Unrefined Cold Pressed Oils

The "best" carrier oils in terms of maintaining some therapeutic properties of the fatty oil are those which are cold pressed and unrefined.

Cold pressed means that no external heat was used during the production of the oil. I say "external" heat because it is not unusual during the pressing process for the temperature of the oil to rise. The temperature is monitored during the process and, depending on the country, not allowed to rise above certain levels.

Expeller pressed oils are produced by pushing the seed against a constantly rotating spiral shaped augur. The pressure and the friction causes the oil to be expelled from the seed.

These oils are then filtered and sold as "cold pressed oil". They are considered unrefined oils.

Common Carrier Oils

There are a number of vegetable oils that are produced for use as carrier oils. All of the oils that are discussed below are available as organic oils, the only exception is rosehip seed oil. When I talk about oils being used as a "base" oil, I mean that the vegetable oil can be used by itself with or without essential oils as a massage oil. Some of the following oils are too thick, rich, etc. to be used by themselves, but rather, should be diluted in a base oil.

Sweet Almond Oil (*prunus amygdalus dulcis*)
The sweet almond tree is native to the Middle

East and Mediterranean. When purchasing almond oil, it is important to ensure that the oil is

from the sweet almond tree. There are two kinds of almond tree: sweet and bitter. The sweet is widely used since the bitter almond oil can be distilled to produce cyanide.

Sweet almond oil has been used for centuries for skincare. It protects and nourishes the skin making it ideal for chapped or irritated skin. It is twice as effective as olive oil in reducing cholesterol. Sweet almond oil can be used as a base oil.

Apricot Kernel (*prunus armeniaca*) has a wonderfully light texture making it easily absorbed by the skin. Apricot kernel oil is perfect for dry, mature, sensitive or inflamed skin. It is a good source of linolenic acid. Given its light texture, it makes a wonderful base oil, especially during the summer months

Avocado oil (*persea Americana*) is native to South America. Its botanical name is derived from its nickname; 'swamp pear' because it was first discovered growing in moist, swampy conditions. Technically, the avocado is a fruit and the oil is extracted from the fleshy part of the fruit and not the pit.

Avocado oil is rich in nutrients including vitamins A and D, lecithin and potassium. The oil is wonderful for mature skin and for moisturizing or soothing skin. I use it in blends for eczema.

Avocado oil can be used as a base oil, particularly in the winter when our skin tends to be drier. I also use it as a base oil in blends for eczema. In the summer, I find avocado oil to be a bit heavy and I tend to blend it in a lighter carrier oil such as sweet almond, hazelnut or kukui nut oils

Coconut oil has been used for centuries to help heal and protect our skin. It is wonderful to use in place of other nut oils when working with clients with skin sensitivities. It is a mild and gentle oil that is wonderful to use on inflamed and irritated skin.

Coconut oil is expeller pressed from the fleshy part of the coconut. It often comes 'refined' meaning that it has been further processed to remove impurities.

Coconut oil solidifies when stored below 76 degrees. To liquefy it, I put the bottle in a warm

bath. I use it as an emulsifying agent for rubs and baths with oils.

Fractionated Coconut oil is considered sterile and is liquid at room temperature. It is good for massage as well as for skin care.

Hazelnut Oil (*corylus avallena L*) is a carrier oil that is wonderful for all skin types. It contains vitamins, minerals and proteins. I use it as a base oil for my massage blends as well as my skin preparations containing essential oils.

Jojoba Oil (*simmondsia chinensis*) is native to Mexico. While we refer to jojoba as an oil, it is actually a liquid wax. Jojoba has been praised for its moisturizing properties. It is so like our own sebum, jojoba can help to regulate and remove our skin's natural oil. I use it as a 10% dilution in a base oil.

Kukui nut oil is expressed from the nut of the kukui tree, the state tree of Hawaii. Its botanical name is *aleurites moluccana*. The trees grow on the lower slopes of the mountains of Hawaii. The kukui tree grows to a height of 80 feet or more with branches as much as 30 feet above the ground. The tree also is known for the white flowers that bloom at the end of the branches.

Hawaiians have used the oil for hundreds of years. Kukui nut oil is high in both linoleic and alpha-linoleic acids in addition to vitamins A, C and E. Kukui nut oil can contain up to 40% linoleic acid, which our bodies can metabolize into GLA and then into prostaglandins. Deficiency in linoleic acid can lead to eczema, loss of hair, liver degeneration, sterility, miscarriage, arthritis and low immune response.

Kukui nut oil is light, odorless and low in viscosity, meaning that the skin easily absorbs it. Its transparency and lightness make it a wonderful oil for warmer weather. It makes a great base oil for the summer time.

Olive Oil (*olea europeaea*), native to the Mediterranean, has been used for centuries for cooking and skincare. Given its natural fragrance and heaviness, I usually dilute it with a lighter oil. Olive oil is great, however, as a first massage oil for newborns and infants.

Rosehip seed oil is another carrier oil that is high in essential fatty acids. Over the past several years, we have been able to document the

properties of rosehip seed oil that has made it an important ingredient in cosmetics and skin preparations.

Rosehip seed oil is the best oil to use on dry, dehydrated skin. It is wonderful on scars, wrinkles and to prevent premature aging.

Rosehip seed oil is expeller or cold pressed. Once only available as a wild-crafted oil, it is now becoming available in organic varieties. The plant, *rosa rubiginosa* or *rosa mosqueta*, is native to the Andes mountains of Chile. Its color can vary from light red/orange to a deeper red. It is odorless and can be used as base oil

Sesame Seed Oil (*sesamum indicum*) is native to China, hence its prevalence in Chinese cooking. It is high in vitamins A, E, B complex as well as

calcium, magnesium and phosphorus. Sesame is a natural moisturizer, but has a distinctive fragrance and is a heavy oil. As such, I dilute sesame in another base oil.

Safflower Oil (*carthamus tinctorius*) is native to North America, but is closely related to the Sunflower family. Safflower oil contains vitamins A, D, B complex and E. It is also rich in calcium, potassium, iron and phosphorus. Safflower oil is good for all skin types and is deeply moisturizing and makes a good base oil.

Sunflower Oil (*helianthus annus*) is native to South America. Like safflower oil, it contains vitamins A, D, B complex and E as well as calcium, potassium, iron, zinc and phosphorus. Sunflower oil is good for all skin types and makes a good base oil.

Specialty Carrier Oils

There are a handful of 'specialty' carrier oils; oils that have specific nutritional or therapeutic effects that may be appropriate from time to time:

Evening Primrose (*oenothera biennis*) is named so because it only blooms in the evening. Native American medicine men were first to discover its healing properties. As mentioned above, evening primrose is rich in gamma linolenic acid or GLA. It is a rich and heavy oil, so I use it in dilution or only on specific sites during a massage.

Borage Seed Oil (*borago officinalis*) is another oil high in GLA as well as vitamins and minerals. I use it for treating PMS, menopausal symptoms and skin conditions such as psoriasis

and eczema. Like evening primrose oil, borage is a thick and heavy oil, so I typically dilute it in a base oil or use only on specific sites.

Carrot Seed Oil (*daucus carota*) is actually an essential oil, but often referred to when discussing carrier oils. Carrot Seed oil is high in beta carotene, vitamins B, C, D and E. It is known to be a skin rejuvenator and is wonderful for dry and mature skin. I use it in dilution with other carrier oils.

Infused/Macerated Carrier Oils

There are a number of carrier oils that are infused or macerated oils. To make your own infused oils, take a high quality carrier oil (for example, safflower or sunflower oil) and place blossoms of a plant such as calendula in the oil. Seal the jar and shake at least once daily for several weeks. At the end of the time, strain off the plant material and you have an infused oil.

Some of the most readily available infused oils are arnica, calendula and St. John's Wort.

Arnica Infused Oil

Most of us have heard of arnica – it is an herb, *arnica Montana* that is native to the higher altitudes of Northern Europe. It has been used for centuries for all types of applications where the skin is not broken: bruises, tendonitis, sprains, aches, pains, etc. Arnica has become an ingredient in over-the-counter remedies.

Arnica is a great addition to blends for the above, particularly when used in a compress. Remember that it should never be used on broken skin and never taken internally.

Calendula Infused Oil

Calendula oil is perhaps one of the oldest infused oils. Folk remedies included calendula for wounds, ulcers, bedsores, bruises and varicose veins. Its wound healing properties have been studied and is the result of the combination of lipophilic and hydrophilic extracts which support the healing of skin, as well as its anti-inflammatory properties.

**St. John's Wort Flowers**

St. John's Wort is also commonly referred to by its botanical name, *hypericum perforatum*, but is named after St. John the Baptist. It is thought that the plant is so named because it blooms on the anniversary of St. John the Baptist's birthday. Another tradition holds that it is so named because the infused oil is the same color as the red sap contained in the plant and represents the blood of John the Baptist.

In addition to its well-known anti-depressant effects, St. John's Wort is also highly anti-viral, particularly against 'enveloped' viruses such as HIV. The oil is used topically for mild burns, bruises, wounds and sores. It can also be used topically as an analgesic for neuralgia, sciatica and rheumatic pain.

St. John's Wort is photosensitizing and should not be used before going out in the sun.