You may have heard of essential oils, but what exactly are they? Essential oils are volatile, aromatic oils from plants. From rituals to medicine, these oils have been used for a variety of reasons throughout history. Now, people typically use these oils for fragrance, flavoring, and even health and beauty purposes. The highly concentrated oils may be inhaled directly or applied to the skin through massage, lotions, or bath salts.

Essential oils are derived from aromatic plant material, usually by distillation. However, oil can also be pressed from plant parts using a process known as expression. Some essential oils are unique because the plants used to make them have different chemical makeups. Additional factors such as location, soil, and climate also affect aromatic properties.

These oils come from a variety of plants, including flowers, herbs, and grasses. For example, the flowering tops of plants are used to make lavender oil, and tall grasses such as lemongrass are also used to make essential oils. Every part of plants—leaves, bark, stems, and even seeds—can be used to produce essential oils.

Aroma therapy may promote relaxation, help relieve stress, and improve mood. It has also been used to help treat a wide range of physical and mental conditions, including burns, infections, depression, insomnia, and high blood pressure.

Essential oils may be obtained from a plant’s flowers, leaves, stalks, bark, rind, or roots. The oils are mixed with
another substance (such as oil, alcohol, or lotion) and put on the skin, sprayed in the air, or inhaled. Essential oils are not to be taken orally. Some essential oils may have anti-viral or antifungal properties. You can also massage the oils into the skin or pour them into bath water. Essential oils can be used to make natural cleaning products for household use, to make a room smell good, or for beauty purposes.

What are the Benefits of Aromatherapy?

Aromatherapy, or essential oils therapy, has been gaining in popularity. Aromatherapy is using a plant’s aroma-producing oils (essential oils) to treat disease, and promote the health of body, mind, and spirit. Aromatherapy is thought to work by stimulating smell receptors in the nose, which then send messages through the nervous system to the limbic system—the part of the brain that controls emotions. Research of the therapeutic use of essential oils extracted from plants is limited. However, some studies have shown that aroma therapy might have health benefits including:

› Relief from anxiety and depression
› Improved quality of life, particularly for people with chronic health conditions
› Improved relaxation and sleep
› Reduce pain from chronic and acute injury and illness.

Is Aromatherapy Safe?

Many essential oils have been shown to be safe when used as directed. However, essential oils used in aromatherapy aren’t regulated by the Food and Drug Administration. When oils are applied to the skin, side effects may include allergic reactions, skin irritation and sun sensitivity.

Aromatherapy practitioners do no need to be licensed in the United States. However, a wide range of licensed health professionals (such as massage therapists, nurses, and counselors) may have experience and training in aromatherapy. It is important to talk to your medical doctor to see whether aromatherapy may be helpful (and safe) for your specific health condition and if there is scientific evidence of the oil’s efficacy in treatment.

References:

University of Florida Extension: http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/hot_topics/environment/essential_oils.shtml