

HEALTH & WELLNESS

A Scent to Lull You to Sleep

By LAURA JONANDES

Tired of counting sheep? An array of lavender aromatherapy products will help you relax and get a good night's sleep, say the companies that sell them. Some studies suggest lavender does help sleep, but physicians say it will likely work best as part of a calming bedtime routine.

Lavender is a flowering plant in the mint family. Its aroma has been shown in human studies "to slow down heart rate, slow blood pressure and put you in a parasympathetic state, which is a relaxed state," says University of Miami School of Medicine scientist Tiffany Field, who has studied the effects of lavender on relaxation and sleep.

Human studies give "some credence" to the idea that lavender facilitates restful sleep, says Vahid Mohsenin, director of the Yale Center for Sleep Medicine in New Haven, Conn. But most are short-term studies, so it isn't known if the positive effects hold up over time—or if there could be long-term negative effects, he adds. Lavender is likely to have a mild positive effect, and is most likely to be helpful in people who don't have a medical reason for insomnia, such as depression, physicians say.

Lavender products aimed at the stressed-out and sleep-challenged include bath salts, massage oils, candles, whole-room diffusers, pillows and a sleep mask. An \$1,899 mattress from Italy's Gruppo Magni, has microcapsules that diffuse a lavender scent as you sleep. Animal pillows from Cloud B Inc., contain lavender to help "lull your children to sleep," says the Torrance, Calif., company, which sells the pillows for \$32.95. Or you can try an aromatherapy patch from Natural Patches of Vermont Inc. based in Westminster, Vt. A tin of 10 "Relaxing Sleep Formula" patches, designed to be stuck on your skin for up to 24 hours, sells for \$15.99. Most of the products haven't been tested in rigorous studies, and to truly prove efficacy, each product must be tested independently, scientists say.

Overall, though, lavender is



Photo: iStockphoto.com/Cloud B Inc.



Lavender (top) can be found in a Cloud B aromatherapy pillow and Dream Essentials sleep mask.

gaining some respect in scientific circles. When brain waves were monitored in a lab in a 31-person sleep study in 2005 at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., whiffs of lavender in vials changed the quality of sleep compared with distilled water smelled as a control by the same subjects on another night. "When people sniffed the lavender before bedtime, it increased their amount of deep sleep, or slow-wave sleep," says researcher Namni Goel, now at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in Philadelphia. Subjects who breathed the lavender, administered intermittently for eight minutes at bedtime, reported feeling more vigorous in the morning than during the night when water was sniffed, the study said.

A British study, presented at the European Sleep Research Society in Glasgow in 2008, tested the effect of lavender

oil sprinkled on the bedclothes of 12 female insomniacs in their 50s, compared with a placebo of almond oil, which has little scent. "They got to sleep more easily and they felt their quality of sleep was better," says lead author Chris Alford, a scientist at the University of the West of England in Bristol.

At least two studies funded by Johnson & Johnson explore the use of calming aromas, including lavender, as part of a bedtime routine for infants and toddlers. A 2007 study found a lavender-scented bath oil helped infants cry less and sleep more deeply and a study of 405 mothers of infants and toddlers, published last year in the journal *Sleep*, found that a bedtime regime using products containing a proprietary scent aided sleep.

The more recent study involved a routine that included a bath with a fragrant cleanser and a massage or application of a scented lotion. The study found the routine helped subjects get to sleep faster and wake up less during the night compared with a control group that followed their children's usual bedtime routines. The nature of the routines wasn't specified, but families that routinely gave children evening baths were excluded.

J&J says the Bedtime brand bath cleanser and lotion used in the study contain "Natural-Calm," a proprietary fragrance a spokeswoman says is reminiscent of lavender. Study author Jodi Mindell, a professor of psychology at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, says the routine itself is likely the most important factor, but the calming scent may play a role.

Lavender aromatherapy is a "reasonable" option to try for people with mild insomnia, but it is most likely to work as part of an overall calming bedtime routine, says Meir Kryger, director of research and sleep education at Gaylord Sleep Medicine, a network of Connecticut sleep clinics. Linking the scent to a calming activity, he adds, "has a positive reinforcement aspect to it. The next time you do it, you will feel even more relaxed."

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