



British Sauna Society Guidance Documentation

Using essential oils in the sauna

Best practice guidelines.

The use of essential oils in saunas has become increasingly popular across the UK. While they can enhance the experience, improper use poses serious safety risks. The British Sauna Society is committed to preserving authentic sauna wellness practices and ensuring that sauna experiences are safe, enjoyable, and effective.

1. Know what your oils are made from.

Synthetic fragrances or “essences” should never be used in a sauna. Unlike pure essential oils, synthetic oils are chemical formulations designed to mimic natural scents. When heated, these chemicals can release volatile compounds that irritate the eyes, nose, throat, and respiratory system, and may trigger headaches, dizziness, or allergic reactions. Synthetic oils also lack the natural therapeutic properties of pure essential oils and can overwhelm the sauna environment with unpleasant or overpowering odors. Only 100% natural essential oils provide a safe, authentic aromatherapy experience. Always check the label for a botanical name. If it’s missing, the oil is likely synthetic or mixed with another product.

2. Holistic benefits of essential oils.

When used correctly, essential oils can significantly enhance the sauna experience. Their natural aromas engage the olfactory system, which is closely connected to the limbic system, the area of the brain responsible for memory, emotion, and mood, helping to promote relaxation, reduce stress, and improve overall wellbeing. Many essential oils also support respiratory comfort and complement the meditative and restorative aspects of sauna bathing. However, because scents are powerful, some aromas may trigger emotional responses or memories, which underscores the importance of trained application. Properly selected and administered, essential oils add a subtle, therapeutic dimension that elevates the holistic wellness benefits of a sauna session.

3. Controlled application: Guests should never handle oils.

Guests should never be allowed to add their own oils or essences. Essential oils are potent, flammable, and can cause irritation or allergic reactions if misused. Allowing untrained individuals to handle oils increases the risk of accidents, overuse, and unsafe exposure. Trained sauna operators ensure safe application and appropriate dosage.



4. Carrier oils can cause damage.

Essential oils mixed with carrier oils (e.g., almond, coconut, or jojoba oil) should never be used. Carrier oils can burn, leave sticky residues, create unpleasant smells, and damage stones or heating elements. Only pure essential oils, applied correctly, should be used.

5. Flammability and safe application.

Essential oils are highly flammable. Direct application to hot stones is extremely dangerous. Proper technique involves cooling the stones with water first and using an ice ball to hold the essential oil. This allows the oil to evaporate safely, releasing its aroma without direct contact with the stones. This method preserves the integrity of the sauna rocks and ensures safety.

Why adding oils to the water bucket is bad practice.

Pouring oils directly into the sauna water bucket is unsafe and ineffective. Oils float on the surface, creating a fire hazard and leaving residues that coat rocks and surfaces, leading to long-term damage. Aroma diffusion is uneven and uncontrolled. Only controlled application techniques, such as using an ice ball, ensure safety and efficacy.

No access to ice? Try an infusion.

If ice is not available, an alternative is to use a natural, synthetic-free, water-based infusion that can be added directly to the water bucket. These can be made using natural ingredients and herbs such as mint, lavender, and rosemary. There are commercially available sauna essences, however ingredient lists should be carefully reviewed, as many contain chemical fragrances.

Another option is to place a bowl of water with essential oils in the sauna, positioned under the benches and away from guests, allowing the aroma to evaporate gently and scent the air without heat contact.

Caution must be taken with all scenting methods, particularly in relation to allergies, sensitivities, and contraindications.

6. Health & safety considerations.

Essential oils are biologically active and may cause reactions in certain individuals. Some oils may be contraindicated to users with medical conditions or taking certain medications. If permitting the use of essential oils in your sauna, sauna staff should be



trained in potential health risks and proper dilution techniques to ensure a safe experience for all guests.

7. Bottles Should Never Enter the Sauna

Essential oil bottles are glass and should **never** be brought into the sauna. Heat can degrade the quality of oils, cause glass to shatter, and increase the risk of spills or burns. Oils should be measured and prepared outside the sauna and applied safely by trained personnel.

8. Education and Training are Key

Proper education and training are essential for anyone using essential oils in a sauna. Sauna operators must understand how to safely cool and apply oils, measure appropriate dosages, and select oils suited to therapeutic purposes. They also need to be aware of potential health risks, contraindications, and how to manage sensitivities in guests. Trained staff ensure that essential oils are used responsibly, enhancing the sauna experience without compromising safety or wellbeing. Education is the cornerstone of a professional, authentic, and enjoyable sauna environment.

Conclusion

Essential oils can transform a sauna session from a simple heat ritual into a deeply restorative and immersive experience, but only when used correctly. When approached thoughtfully, and with knowledge, essential oils bring not just aroma, but relaxation, clarity, and a little touch of magic to every sauna session, reminding us that wellness is as much about intention and mindfulness as it is about heat and steam. By adhering to these principles, sauna operators can provide safe, authentic, and truly therapeutic experiences that honor the integrity of this ancient wellness tradition.

The British Sauna Society welcomes feedback and shared learning on this guidance. If you have thoughts, experience, or practical insights to contribute, please contact content@britishsaunasociety.org for consideration in future updates.