What is an Emulsifier?

by Penny Keay

You see this ingredient on our website and throughout our Tips and Newsletters. So what exactly is an emulsifier?

Most folks know and understand that oil and water do not mix. But you can help them stay blended together by using an agent called an emulsifier.

If you are trying to mix your essential oils with a water based product or in water you will need to first mix them with an Emulsifier.

An emulsifier is anything that will allow you to mix oil and water. Commonly used products in aromatherapy as Emulsifiers include but are not limited to: PEG-7 Glyceryl Cocoate (a coconut oil based emulsifier), perfumers alcohol, Polysorbate 20, 60 or 80, Turkey Red Sulfated Castor oil to name a few.

Emulsifiers will help the essential oils to blend with your water based products. It will help to keep the essential oils in suspension. An emulsifier is used whenever you want to mix two components and hopefully keep them from separating. Emulsifiers are used where one ingredient is oil based (essential oils) and the other is water based. Water based products would include such items as shampoos, conditioners and lotions.

Emulsifiers are not needed when you are mixing essential oils with an oil based product, like when you are making massage oil. Since massage oil is typically made when you blend carrier oil and a small percentage of essential oils. Typical carrier oils are Sweet Almond, Jojoba, and Fractionated coconut. There are many carrier oils used in aromatherapy and massage.

When mixing essential oils with carrier oils for use in overall or general body massage, you should keep the percentage of essential oils to about 2-3% of the blend. Again since no water is involved you do not need an emulsifier.

There are many different types of substances that can be used to ‘emulsify’ depending on what you are mixing together and the purpose or end use.

Typically, the commonly used emulsifiers used in Aromatherapy are to help blend essential oils into water based sprays. But you may need to use them to make other products like bath salts and to scent some lotions, creams and hair care products. In the rest of the cosmetic industry they help not only to keep the product from separating they may also help to thicken the final product.

Emulsifiers help the essential oils stay blended and suspended into your product. Since there are several emulsifiers that can be used, we commonly suggest our Coconut oil based Emulsifier as it is easy to use and is safe to use since it is derived from coconut oil. Polysorbate 20 is also a mild emulsifier and can be used similarly to the Coconut Emulsifier. The Polysorbate emulsifiers (40, 60 80 and beyond) come in varying strengths but the stronger the product the more chance of skin irritation being a problem for those products used on the skin.

Some folks like to use alcohol for emulsifying their essential oils when making room sprays. The problem is that alcohol can irritate your lungs. Also for success in keeping your spray from separating you have to use

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a lot of alcohol. Note: if you are using products for yourself or to give as gifts you can use alcohol in your product. If you plan on selling items with alcohol in the ‘mix’ you will need to check regulations for the use of alcohol since it is regulated by the ATF department in the USA. Other countries you will need to check your own regulations for alcohol use in everyday products.

Another option is Turkey Red oil – this is a type of sulfonated castor oil. Works great in bath oil products but in some cases you will see the red coloring. Turkey Red oil is rarely used in other cosmetic products. But it is an option for use in bath oils and can be purchased in many health food stores and pharmacies. (We no longer carry Turkey Red oil as we cannot find a wholesale supplier for it.)

If you are making lotions or creams and other products from ‘scratch’ there are several other emulsifiers specifically used for those types of products.

**How do I use an emulsifier?**
The emulsifier needs to be mixed with your essential oils BEFORE you add them to your water based spray or product. You want to make sure the essential oils are well blended with the emulsifier first.

So blend the emulsifier with your essential oils then let them sit for a few hours to see if any separation occurs. Be patient wait out the time, it is a very important step. If there is no separation after several hours then you are ready to add it to your water base.

Most emulsifiers are blended at the rate of one part emulsifier to one part essential oils. Some essential oils may not need as much emulsifier and others will need more emulsifier in order to be blended.

Remember to write down your recipe so next time you will know the quantities of each part that works.

Unfortunately there is no set rule as to how much emulsifier will be needed to be used with your blend of essential oils. You will have to experiment. All is not lost though, if for some reason, your essential oils do separate and float to the top, simply just shake or stir them back in. Just remember to write down in your ‘recipe’ that you need to use more emulsifier next time. You will see on many products that it tells you to ‘Shake well before each use’. That is because even though the product has an emulsifier, it still may want to separate out to varying degrees.

As with anything you add essential oils to, it is best to use them within a few weeks. You always want to use the freshest made items to see the best results.

Have fun blending.

PS. Need recipes to try? See my Recipe Book
"Aromatherapy Recipes using Pure Essential oils Volume 1" by Penny Keay

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