

Fun Facts Friday: Elephant Self-Medication

The science of animal self-medication is called zoopharmacognosy, the use of plants, soils, and other natural substances by animals in ways that may support their health. It's been observed across species, from insects and primates to elephants.

Mahouts in Asia have long noted that elephants seek out specific roots and vines during digestive upset or low appetite. People also use some of these plants for those very complaints.

In Kenya, pregnant elephants have been observed eating leaves from trees in the Boraginaceae family to induce delivery and help with postpartum symptoms. Kenyan women brew tea from these plants for that purpose.

A 2025 study of African forest elephants in Gabon found that individuals with higher parasite loads were more likely to consume banana stems and papaya plants, both of which contain compounds that affect intestinal parasites, often choosing these over more nutritious food.

These observations suggest elephants may be selecting certain plants for more than nutrition, even as science continues to sort out how and why.

Photo: Mundi making her natural selections.

