

Fun Facts Friday: Elephant Mothers and Medicinal Plants

Previously, we explored zoopharmacognosy, the study of animal self-medication, and evidence that elephants may select certain plants when unwell. A 2026 study from Kenya adds an intriguing question: might elephant mothers also offer particular plants to their calves for health-related reasons?

Researchers interviewed eight Sabaot community members around Mount Elgon National Park, including wildlife scouts, guides, and elders, each with more than 20 years' experience observing local elephants. Botanists identified the plants they named, many of which are also used in traditional medicine in the region.

Observers described mothers giving calves aloe, reportedly to increase appetite, and mixing certain plants with their milk, which some likened to immunization. The researchers did not track whether calves were ill or whether the plants helped, and they note that informants' explanations may be shaped by their own knowledge of medicinal plants.

The authors recommend testing the plants and following individual elephants over time. Because elephant self-medication remains understudied, these accounts offer a promising avenue for investigation.

Photo: A wild African elephant and calf

