

Self-medication by African Elephants

Prelims: Current events of national and international importance | Environment

Why in News?

A recent study demonstrated that African elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) in Kenya's Mount Elgon region systematically engage in zoopharmacognosy (animal self-medication).

Key Behavioral Discoveries

- Researchers cataloged the elephants utilizing 35 different plant species, with 25 having documented medicinal properties used in local indigenous human herbalism (such as treating gastrointestinal parasites, inflammation, and fatigue).
- This discovery expands the known boundary of intentional, multi-botanical self-medication beyond great apes to include wild megaherbivores.
- **Remedy Preparation for Calves-** Adult female elephants extract specific roots and leaves, such as *Angurweet* (a plant traditionally used for stomach discomfort), chew them into a pulp with their own milk, and administer the mixture directly to unwell calves.
- This represents one of the rare recorded cases of **allochthonous self-medication** (a parent actively preparing and administering a botanical remedy to offspring).
- Elephants consume these specific plants in small, controlled quantities or after making targeted detours when exhibiting signs of lethargy, digestive distress, or physical injury.

Significance

- Proves that complex herbal knowledge and self-treatment behaviors are not restricted to primates, highlighting higher cognitive function, spatial memory, and cultural transmission among elephant herds.
- The study reinforces the **One Health model**, showing how human, animal, and ecosystem health are deeply interconnected.
- Chemical analysis of the plants selected by elephants offers promising avenues for novel bioprospecting and drug discovery.
- The research relied on collaborative tracking with local indigenous experts (such as the Sabaot community of Mount Elgon), illustrating how indigenous oral histories and modern scientific field research mutually validate one another.

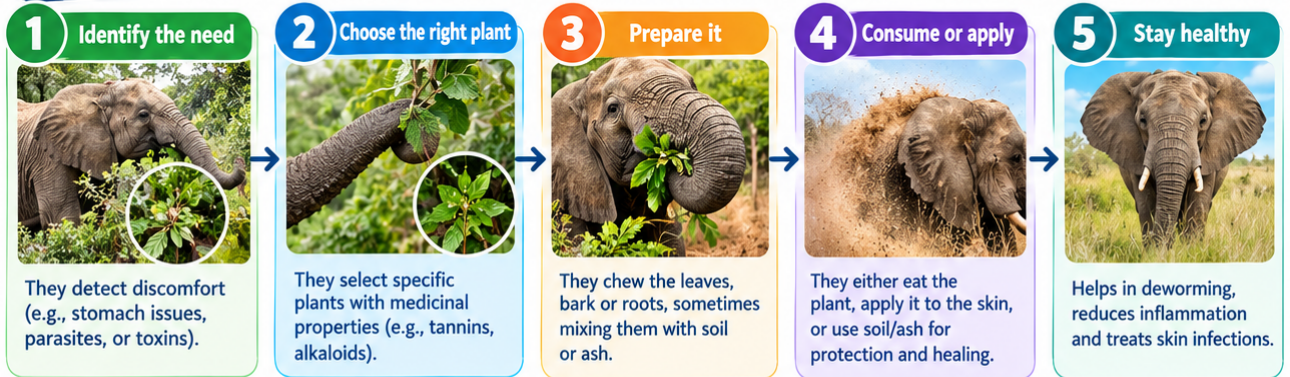
Self-Medication by African Elephants

Nature's own healers!

African elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) intentionally use plants and soil to treat ailments and stay healthy.



How They Do It?



Common Plants Used



Scented leaves
(e.g., Acacia)



Bitter plants
(e.g., Albizia)



Tree bark
(e.g., Terminalia)



Soil/Ash
(for detoxification)



Key Findings

- **Study:** Cambridge University (in collaboration with Kenya).
- ~ 70% of elephants observed self-medicating.
- 114 plant species identified with medicinal use.



Why It Matters



Shows complex **cognitive abilities**.



Helps in conservation and habitat protection.



Offers clues for new medicines.

Not just giants of the wild,
but natural healers too!

Reference

[The Hindu | African elephants self-medicate too](#)



SHANKAR
IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering