

Why use Zoopharmacognosy (animal self-medication)?

Written by [Carol Fieldhouse](#)

Animals (and we can) self-select remedies that are needed from the wild. It is an innate ability we all developed over thousands of years in order to survive, and it is an ability we still have.

There are many examples of animals in the wild selecting and eating substances that would usually be poisonous when they had specific problems, such as parasites, with great results. Even organisms as small as caterpillars are seen to eat different plants when certain parasites have laid eggs in them.

How does self-selection work?

Animals' (and our own) bodies cleverly adjust **how we sense substances** according to our needs at any particular moment. For example, a substance such as liquorice root will taste bitter if we don't need it, or sweet if we do (it is an anti-inflammatory that can mimic cortisone in the body, amongst other things).

Animal species vary in how they favour their senses e.g. dogs use their sense of smell a lot more than we do because their olfactory mechanism is incredibly sensitive).

The preferred way to receive the substances varies too e.g. horses and dogs will ingest the oils and nutrients whereas cats generally will just sniff them.

Ingraham Applied Zoopharmacognosy*

Caroline Ingraham (who developed '[Ingraham Applied Zoopharmacognosy](#)') is the leading expert in the field of animal self-medication and has featured in many scientific magazines and articles, has written various books on the subject and appeared on TV.

Allowing the animal to address his/her issues naturally can reveal hidden causes and bridge the communication gap between animal and carer. Do [visit her website](#) and look at the information and videos there to find out more. She has also written some excellent books on the topic.

A particularly poignant example of Caroline using Zoopharmacognosy that was covered in one of the pre-requisite webinars for my course was the case of Sinya who had been stuck down a well in putrid water and injured by other predators. She wasn't responding to antibiotics or other medicines so Caroline went over to Kenya to see if she could do anything.

Sinya was a rescued elephant calf at the Sheldrick Trust in Kenya. Severely wounded and having been trapped in putrid well water, her prognosis was not good. The video below shows how Caroline worked with Sinya and the results that were achieved through Applied Zoopharmacognosy. Green clay applied to her wounds allowed them to heal without infestation from flies. Self-selected oils, Garlic initially, helped her to heal herself.

This innate ability is awesome. Even newborns apparently know what they need if given the opportunity to select for themselves.

Attending Caroline Ingraham's two-day Applied Zoopharmacognosy course for dogs and watching her webinars has really enthused me. I even used it for my husband when he had a painful knee – he was given the choice between a few oils and chose the one that smelt best to him. It seemed to help!

***What is Zoopharmacognosy?**

Definition – Ancient Greek – 'zoo' (animal); 'pharmaco' (remedy); 'gnosy' (knowing)
Zoopharmacognosy is the study of animal self-medication in the wild. It looks at how animals have the innate ability to select what they need at any particular time. It is an ability required for survival and developed over thousands of years.

How I found zoopharmacognosy

I've had Caroline Ingraham's book 'Help your dog heal itself' for some time but never got started using it. By pure chance, a friend told me about a canine course being run locally to me in September 2021. In the end, the friend didn't go and I did.

Perhaps it was meant to be!

Before attending there were various recorded webinars to watch and those inspired me so much that I ordered my own kit of oils, waters and nutrients to get me started properly!

Allowing the animal to choose

We humans usually guess what our animals require (all be it educated guesses) and provide it.

Applied Zoopharmacognosy turns that around and the animal takes the lead. That might sound easy? I thought so. In fact, allowing the animal to select what it requires is time consuming and sensitive work. Very different from bunging food in a bowl and expecting him/her to eat it!

Here, it is necessary to work methodically, slowly and calmly in the way, and at the speed, the animal needs. Sometimes he/she will want a snooze and we must wait. The first time I tried it at home I was awful. Fortunately, I took a video and was horrified when I played it back. I belted through the oils one after another for poor Jack! I now realise that he is a dog who likes to take his time. He works with oils from quite a distance away, taking each one in for a good while, giving very subtle signals regarding his desire for each. Oops, he's not someone to rush!

Gaining information

Assuming the human gets it right, one ends up with a shortlist of items that are the top priority for the animal. We also know how he/she wants to receive it.

For dogs:

- some will just sniff. This can be from the other side of the room after the oil lid was quickly removed and replaced or very close and for a long time or any level in between
- orally – some will want to lick or drink the oil (like the elephant above). It is important to know which can be consumed in this way. Some can be mixed with aloe to dilute them.
- applied to the body. Oils will vary in suitability for this and sometimes need to be mixed with something such as aloe to be suitable for this. The animal will indicate where he/she wants it applied.

From all of that, we can gain extra insights and Caroline's wonderful book/s summarise further information about the oils from which it may be possible to perhaps deduce what might be going on for the animal. Useful information to provide to our vet perhaps.

Not making assumptions, especially for behavioural issues

Working methodically, slowly and carefully, Caroline said she found was more effective than jumping to conclusions or even using muscle testing. She emphasised that quite often a behavioural issue can turn out to have a physical issue underneath it. Do not head straight to oils to address behaviour issues, take the time to be thorough and ensure you give the dog the opportunity to select oils for underlying problem/s too.

Each animal knows what he/she needs!

The canine course I attended

Everyone on the two-day course had watched the online canine webinars as homework beforehand so the course was a refresher and very practical. We were from a wide variety of dog-related backgrounds – a vet, veterinary nurses, dog trainers/walkers, holistic dog groomers, dog massage therapists and pet owners.

A number of different dogs visited so we could learn how to apply the Zoopharmacognosy.

One great teacher was a gorgeous Working Cocker Spaniel. He was hyperactive, eating socks and other things. His owner said he never relaxed. Gradually, as the different oils were selected it became apparent which he wanted and we could deduce possible reasons.

He'd been long docked as a puppy (apparently a Vet in America says all dogs have pain along the spine after being docked) and Caroline has found it is quite common for docked dogs to indicate they need remedies such as St John's Wort applied to their spine. This little fella clearly indicated he wanted it there.

Once this, and other selected oils, had been sniffed and/or applied, the little dog lay down and snoozed. The energy in the whole room changed from frantic to calm and relaxed. It was wonderful, his owner said it was unheard of for him to relax! What an amazing gift this is. He must have been in pain all the time.

Apparently hyperactive dogs and other dogs displaying behaviour problems (such as separation anxiety) that come from loving homes often turn out to have pain or another physical problem. Once that is dealt with, the behaviour may not be displayed.

Caroline emphasised we should scan through the range of oils rather than go straight to the oils more closely linked to displayed behaviours to ensure that underlying problems are not missed.

My Kiwi

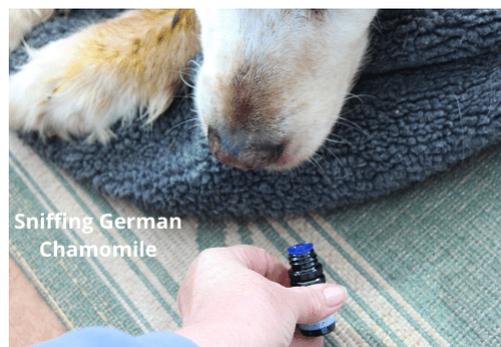
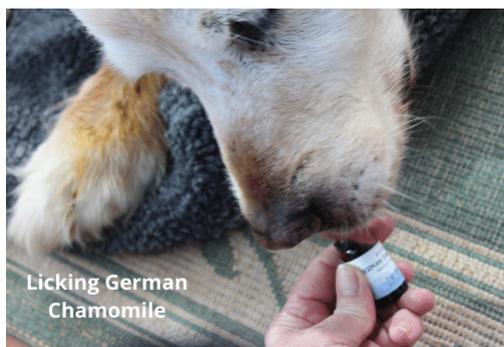
My lad, Kiwi, was lucky enough to have his time in the limelight. He was at the time a 14.5-years-old. He is a Golden Retriever with all sorts of age-related stuff going on. The main issue was Laryngeal paralysis that made his breathing laboured in the heat and caused him to retch sometimes as well as arthritis.

First, he was given the opportunity to self-select a variety of different nutrients and oils. He polished the lot off, apart from Spirulina! That didn't give us a lot of information, other than that he was feeling in need of broad support! He also licked some of these onto his front legs as another form of self-medication (so ended up with a very strange mixture of colours there!).

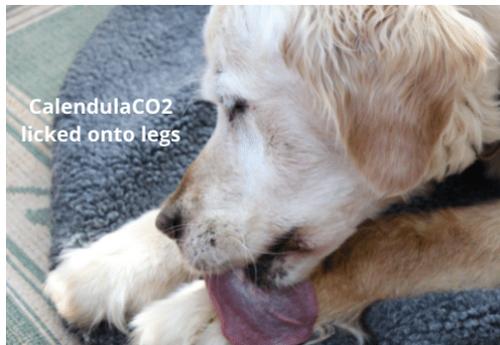
When it came to the oils, he selected:

- **Peppermint** which has some anti-inflammatory qualities, digestive, nerve stimulation and also respiratory support, amongst other things. Caroline mixed it with some aloe vera gel and Kiwi wanted it down his spine and on the right side of his neck.
- **German Chamomile** which is a useful remedy for inflammatory pain (inhibits the enzyme Cox-2 apparently), allergies, anxiety related stomach problems and many other things. Again, this was added to Aloe Vera gel. He wanted it applied to his throat, behind his left ear and on his spine. He also drank some of it.
- **Neroli** was put on a cloth for him. He lay down with his nose on that for a good while. It has emotional support properties and can release old memories of separation.

I continued with him after the course and the need for the nutrients, in particular, changed over time. I thought I was going to have to bulk buy liquorice root and rosehip powder but after a couple of days, he only consumed a small amount each time.



The German Chamomile and Peppermint remains his choice at the time of writing. In the photos below he also has selected some Calendula CO2 (a sticky form of concentrated calendula) that he licked onto his front legs.



My other dog, Jack, is also still selecting remedies and supplements.

It is interesting to see how engaged the animal gets when it feels he/she has control over what is provided. Being heard at long last is much appreciated.

This is certainly something I am going to continue with and learn more about. It is such a powerful tool to have. I am so looking forward to using it for my clients' dogs too.

Further information

Visit Caroline Ingraham's [website](#) for loads more information, videos etc. Some of the work she's done is really inspiring. There are examples of it being used in practice in the [chronicles section](#). There is some free information about working with your cat/dog/horse and also paid courses in the Education section. Then, of course, there are books, oils and other items for sale in the shop.

All her experience, including accessing many research papers and other scientific information, has enabled Caroline to hone down what she uses to a shortlist of oils, nutrients and waters that will work for a range of different species.

Through understanding the key constituents of certain of the oils she has been able to work out possible reasons each might be selected and therefore gain an understanding of what is probably needing to be addressed for that animal at that time.

The substances she sources and sells are top quality. She cited examples of sub-standard (including, sadly, some better-known brands) or old oils being used leading to sad results where animals had not responded or had declined because they weren't receiving the essential ingredients at the right level for progress to continue.