

Herbs for Animals
ALTERNATIVE VETERINARY MEDICINE CENTRE
Information Sheet A-WS143/09
Christopher Day - Veterinary Surgeon

Copyright © 2009 AVMC
Chinham House, Stanford in the Vale, Oxon SN7 8NQ UK
01367 710324
This is a page from www.alternativevet.org

HERBS FOR ANIMALS



History

Herbs have been medicine and food for animals, since animal life emerged. Animals therefore have an inherent instinct for herbal medication of their health problems (zoopharmacognosy*), whether horses, dogs, cats, cattle, rabbits or other species. Human peoples also had this instinct for their own medicine and ancient civilisations used herbs for

animals too, but modern 'civilisation' and 'education' have seriously lessened our natural instinctive ability and capability.

Having said that, and despite the fact that the modern Western establishment appears to like to relegate herbalism to the status of 'folklore' or 'old wives' tales', herbs or derivatives from herbs form the basis of much of the modern conventional medical armoury. Unsurprisingly, while very willing to exploit the clear therapeutic benefits of herbs, the pharmaceutical industry does not readily advertise these 'humble' origins!

Herbs contain a vast spread of pharmacologically-active ingredients and each herb has its own unique combination and properties. They are classified in modern herbal medicine according to their spheres of action. Many herbs contain ingredients which provide the whole plant with several such actions, combined in the one medicine. Recognised actions include alterative, anodyne, anthelmintic, anticatarrhal, anti-emetic, anti-inflammatory, antilithic, antibacterial, antifungal, antispasmodic, aperient/laxative, aromatic, astringent, bitter, cardiac, carminative, cathartic/purgative, cholagogue and anticholagogue, demulcent, diaphoretic, diuretic, ecboic, emetic, emollient, expectorant, febrifuge, galactagogue, hepatic, hypnotic, nervine, rubefacient, sedative, sialogogue, soporific, stimulant, styptic, tonic, vesicant and vulnerary.

Herbs for Animals - AVMC

Alternatively, herbal medicines may be classified according to the category of constituents in their composition. Constituents include acids, alcohols, alkaloids, anthraquinones, bitters, carbohydrates, cardiac glycosides, coumarins, flavones, flavonoid glycosides, phenols, saponins, tannins and volatile oils.

Herbal medicines are traditionally selected according to the perceived needs of the patient and based upon the individual herbs' constituents in relation to the above mentioned actions. Whether single herbs are used, or a combination of herbs is selected, depends upon the spread of activity of each herb and whether or not it supplies the necessary spectrum of action in the body.



Echinacea

It is of fundamental importance in herbal medicine that plants are identified correctly. They should be harvested from unpolluted areas, where possible and should, if cultivated, be grown without the use of modern [agro-chemicals](#). It is also advisable that, where possible, indigenous species should be used because they may prove more suited to the patient's constitution than exotic

herbs.

Practical Application - Veterinary Herbal Medicine

Herbs can be used for dogs, cats, horses, ponies and many other animal species. Horses and ponies respond particularly well. This has led to an explosion of commercial exploitation. More and more herbal products are appearing on the shelves of horse feed outlets, pet outlets and on the internet. However, there are few experienced herbal vets in the UK, so coordination of input in a holistic manner is not common.

Traditional Herbal Medicine, whether Ayurvedic medicine, Indian herbs, Chinese herbs ([Traditional Chinese Medicine](#) - TCM), Western herbs, African herbs, Native North American herbal lore or other indigenous practice, is a holistic therapy and relies upon the whole plant, or defined portions of it. It does not presume to identify a single pharmacologically-active ingredient for isolated use.

Modern Herbal Medicine is drifting towards pharmacognosy, the science of defining specific supposed 'active' ingredients, then extracting and purifying them and using them in isolation. This is not holistic medicine and it carries inherent dangers, which do not attach to using whole plants. Ingredients of the whole plant tend to act in synergy and to balance each other in nature, whereas man disturbs this balance with his 'interference'. This is also happening in the veterinary field. Many products are now being marketed in this way, especially herbs for horses and herbs for dogs. Some [nutraceutical](#) products are formulated with this rationale.

It is then but a small step to altering molecules, patenting them and making millions of pounds/dollars from a marketed drug, with even greater potential for

Herbs for Animals - AVMC

[side-effects](#) (this is the essence of **modern conventional drug medicine**, which has clearly evolved from herbal medicine in this way).

Herbal medicine includes such amazingly effective agents as **willow bark** (providing salicylate, which is an Aspirin-like and effective pain killer, at much lower doses than one might expect, when compared to Aspirin itself), **Digitalis** or **foxglove** (a remarkably effective heart drug, having action on all aspects of cardiac function), **dandelion** (an effective diuretic, providing copious potassium, which modern diuretics tend to drain from the body! - French name *pis en lit*) and **periwinkle** or **Vinca** (a predecessor of the potent cancer drug Vincristine).



Early morning sun catches our herb garden

In horses particularly, since they are classical herbivores, herbs provide a useful source of minerals and vitamins, in my opinion better than artificial sources. In this situation, we may describe herbs for horses as food, playing an important part in the [nutrition](#) of the animal. The boundary

between food and medicine was never so blurred as in herbal lore. Hippocrates is credited with saying “*let food be thy medicine and medicine thy food*”. The distinction is not clear and there is no reason for it to be clear. It is true to say, however, that herbs fall into various categories, some much more food-like than others and some much more medicine-like than others. It is the context, the motivation and the dosage which govern the rôle of the herb.

Conditions often treated with **herbs**, in dogs, cats, horses and other animals, sometimes in conjunction with other therapies, are: [COPD](#), [laminitis](#), digestive disturbance, diarrhoea, nervousness, arthritis, liver problems (hepatopathy), sinusitis, chronic cough, skin problems, respiratory problems, heart problems, hoof quality (hoof health) and kidney problems. At the **AVMC**, we also formulate herb mixes to accompany grass pastures or for winter time, to ensure availability of essential nutrients. Modern [grassland management](#), whether supplying grazing or conserved forage (hay, haylage, grass nuts, dried grass), is not conducive to optimum horse health and well-being and supplying a variety of nutritious herbs can compensate for this to an extent.

Species treated by the AVMC include: horses, ponies, goats, donkeys, cats, dogs, cattle, pigs, sheep, llamas, alpacas, buffalo, rabbits, ferrets, guinea pigs, lizards, terrapins, tortoises, snakes, raptors, poultry (domestic fowl), cage birds, budgies, canaries, budgerigars, parrots, parakeets, macaws, birds of prey (raptors).

The AVMC accepts referrals in Veterinary Acupuncture, Veterinary Homeopathy, Veterinary Herbal Medicine, back problems in dogs, back problems in horses, back problems in cats, back problems in all species.



There is a logic in the notion that herbs indigenous to the patient's country should be used in preference to 'exotic' herbs, although Chinese and Ayurvedic herbs have become fashionable in the UK, at present. There follow some simplified examples of Western herbs, classified according to pharmacological activity:

- **Alteratives** e.g.: *Burdock* (Arctium)
- **Antispasmodics** e.g.: *Black Cohosh* (Cimicifuga - USA)
- **Aperients** e.g.: *Flax seed* (Linum)

- **Astringents** e.g.: *Golden Rod* (Solidago)
- **Anthelmintics** e.g.: *Garlic* (Allium)
- **Bitters** e.g.: *Tansy* (Tanacetum)
- **Carminatives** e.g.: *Sage* (Salvia)
- **Cardiacs** e.g.: *Hawthorn* (Crataegus)
- **Demulcents** e.g.: *Comfrey* (Symphytum)
- **Diaphoretics** e.g.: *Elder* (Sambucus), *Cleavers* (Galium)
- **Diuretics** e.g.: *Dandelion* (Taraxacum)
- **Expectorants** e.g.: *Vervain* (Verbena)
- **Febrifuges** e.g.: *Angelica* (Angelica)
- **Hepatics** e.g.: *Motherwort* (Leonurus)
- **Nervines** e.g.: *Hops* (Humulus)
- **Rubefacients** e.g.: *Nettle* (Urtica)
- **Sedatives** e.g.: *Skullcap* (Scutellaria), *Valerian* (Valeriana)
- **Stimulants** e.g.: *Horseradish* (Cochlearia)
- **Tonics** e.g.: *Elecampane* (Inula)
- **Vulneraries** e.g.: *Marigold* (Calendula), *Cleavers* (Galium)

Since finite doses of pharmacologically-active agents are being given in herbal medicine, it is very possible that dosing with many of the available herbal

Herbs for Animals - AVMC

medicines would cause a horse or dog to fail competition 'dope' tests. There is also a definite risk of residues in food animal products, such as meat, milk or eggs. It is possible, furthermore, that herbs can 'summate', potentially dangerously, with conventional drugs given for similar purposes.



Many unlicensed herbal 'products' exist on the market, advertised with great vigour and containing quasi-legal, unsupported, medical claims, whether in the literature, on the label or in the name. The **AVMC** advises to avoid these. They are not tailored to your animal. They are sold more for profit than for medicine. No effort has been spent on supplying proof of efficacy, safety and quality (as required for a product licence), despite the claims or implied claims of efficacy and many of the companies have no proper herbal tradition. Caveat emptor - buyer beware!

Christopher Day, herbal vet and holistic vet, has used herbs in veterinary medicine since 1972 and is willing to share experiences, understanding and ideas.

[Aromatherapy](#) (the use of so-called essential oils) is a branch of herbal medicine. While [homeopathy](#) uses herbs in the preparation of some of its medicines, it should not be confused with herbal medicine.

The Law

The [Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966](#) restricts the treatment of animals (other than your own) with herbal medicine, by anyone other than a fully qualified vet.

To return to the web site of the AVMC, click the 'BACK' button of your browser or click www.alternativevet.org

This site is subject to frequent ongoing development and expansion - please revisit to view new material