Herbs and Herbals in Animal Nutrition

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ABSTRACT

Herbs and herbal extracts have been used for thousands of years in curing and treating diseases in both human and animals. Records have shown that animals were fed herbs and spices to cure certain diseases more than 5000 years ago. The Indian ayurvedic and Chinese medicine used herbs and spices to enhance health and also treat diseases. Common spices such as tumeric, ginger and garlic have been indicated to contain active compounds that apart from giving flavour to our otherwise mundane cooked food, also contain compounds with properties that can improve health and increase immunity. Despite the widespread use of herbs as medicine, healing aids and health foods little work has been done to support the claims scientifically. Only in recent years that scientists have isolated and identified the active compounds in herbs in relation to their functions. It is known that many herbs contain one or more active ingredients and that combination of herbs tend to be more effective than the use of single herbs. However, the combinations have not been established and a lot more research is needed so that we can understand the functions of herbs. Herbs can be classified according to their functions or actions such as those that have antioxidants properties, antibiotic properties, immune system enhancer etc. Caution should be taken in using herbal preparations as many of these herbs have not been tested out fully and their safety as far as human health are concerned are still much to be understood. While it is natural for the public to assume that herbs are organic and safe, there have been incidences of toxicity, abuse and side effects produced by these herbs. Special care must be given when giving herbs as medication when the animal is suffering from kidney, heart or lung ailments.

Key words: herbals, antioxidants, natural cures, herbs in nutrition

INTRODUCTION

Under natural conditions animals instinctively look for and consume herbs to cure certain diseases. It has been observed that animals such as cats and dogs, rabbits and horses search for special herbs when they are sick. Traditional herbal medicine, whether Ayurvedic medicine, Indian herbs, Chinese herbs, Western herbs or African herbs are generally holistic in therapy and relies upon the whole plant, roots, seeds or leaves that has been established to be more effective. Traditionally the selected herb or parts of the herbs has not been presumed to contain a single pharmacologically-active ingredient.

Modern herbal medicine is going towards pharmacognosy, the science of defining 'active' ingredients, then extracting and purifying them and using them in isolation. This is not a holistic approach as individual active compounds may act differently and cause different effects. When herbs are used as a whole plant or leaves etc combined with other herbs these active ingredients work in synergy and in harmony hence give the desired effects naturally. However, this is not the case with regards to modern medicine as more and more herbs have been identified and the active ingredients isolated.

Classifications of Herbs

The Cherokee herb medicine advocated by (Winston D, 1992) divide herbs into three classes, namely, (a) the "food herbs" which are gentle in action, have very low toxicity, and are unlikely to cause an adverse response (e.g. Lemon Balm, Peppermint, Marshmallow, Ginger, Garlic, Chamomile, Hawthorn, Rose hips, Nettles, Dandelion Root and Leaf, and fresh Oat extract) and can be utilized in substantial quantities over long periods of time without any acute or chronic toxicity, (b) the "medicine herbs" which are stronger acting and used for specific purposes at proper dosage and may