

WILD MEDICINE



Life can be hard out in the wild. Animals sometimes break bones or get cuts and bruises. They're attacked by blood-sucking parasites and disease-causing germs. Sometimes they eat poisonous plants or bad food. Yet wild animals stay pretty healthy. How do they do it?

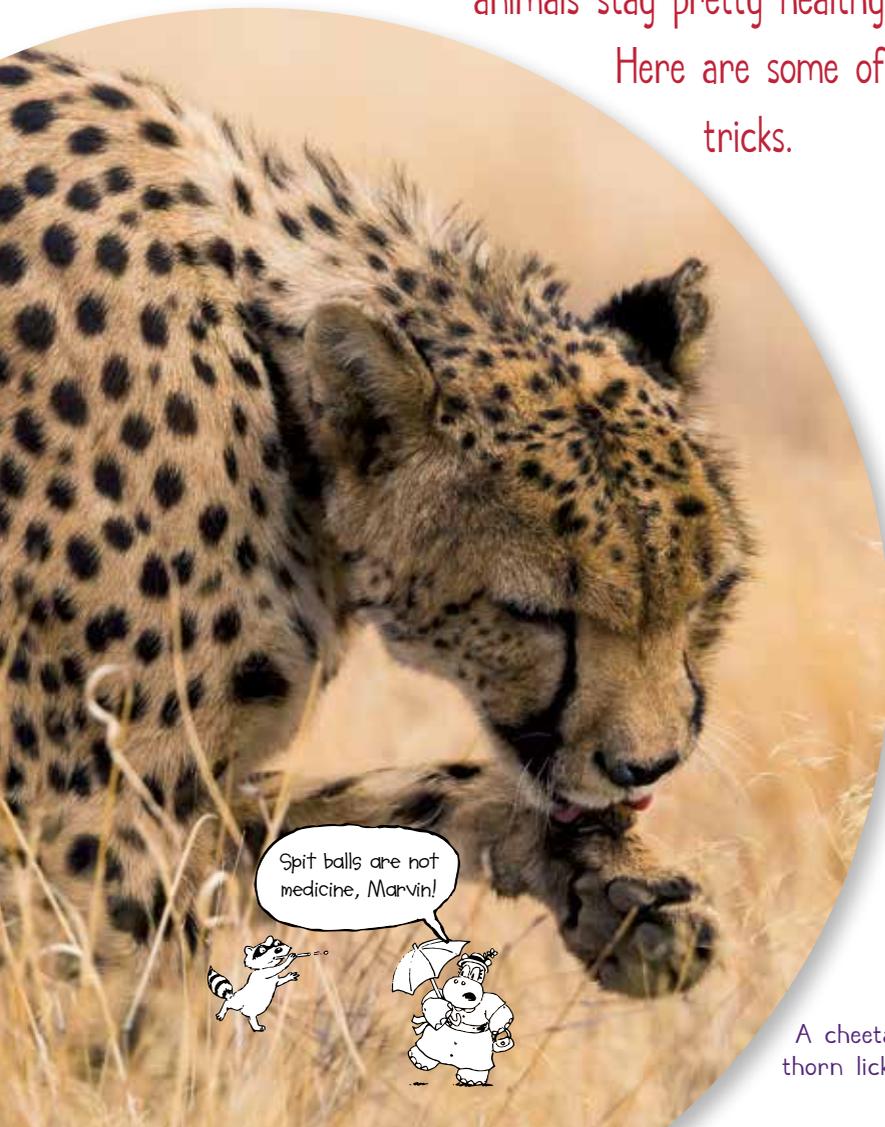
Here are some of their tricks.



Tip #1 Spit on It

Have you ever seen your dog or cat lick its wounds? Why do they do it? It probably feels good, but it's good medicine too. Licking cleans a wound, and saliva contains chemicals that kill germs. For many animals in the wild, spit is great medicine for cuts and scrapes. Even a human being will suck on a cut finger. Now you know why.

A cheetah that has stepped on a thorn licks its way back to health.

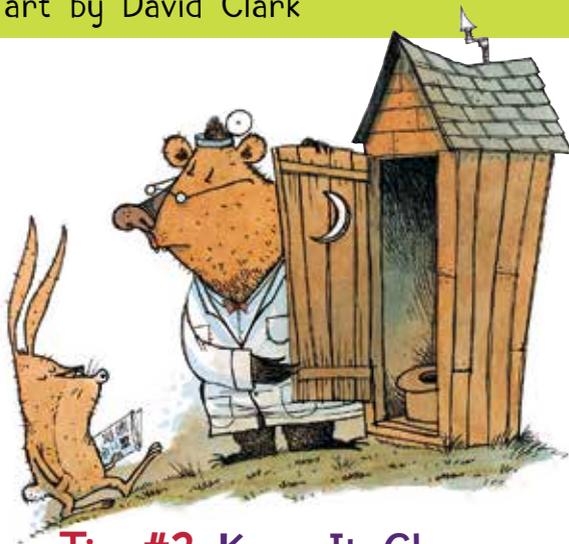


Spit balls are not medicine, Marvin!



When you're sick or injured, you can go to a doctor. But what do wild animals do? How do they stay healthy?

by Ellen R. Braaf
art by David Clark



Tip #2 Keep It Clean

To avoid disease, many animals practice good hygiene. Chimpanzees, for instance, hate to be dirty. They'll use handfuls of leaves to wipe away poop, pee, blood, or mud—all of which can carry disease.

Most animals separate their pooping areas from their eating areas. Horses poop far from the grass they graze on. Rabbits pile their droppings in special “potty” areas.

Baboons in Amboseli National Park in Kenya sleep on low branches or rock outcroppings. When they poop, it falls to the ground. After



Dung beetles roll away poop to eat and lay their eggs in. They are nature's clean-up crew.

one or two nights, the baboons move to another, cleaner spot. They don't return until dung beetles have cleaned up the old area, rolling away the poop to snack on.



A little higher, please



Ah, that feels good. An oxpecker bird gives an impala some friendly help by picking ticks out of those hard-to-reach places.

Tip #3 Pick Off Pests

Bug bites are not just annoying and itchy. If there's enough of them, blood-drinking insects can weaken or even kill an animal. Mosquitoes, mites, ticks, fleas, and lice can also spread diseases and parasites. So to stay healthy, animals do their best to shake off the pests. Some animals pick the critters off. Others fidget and twitch and move constantly to avoid getting bitten.



Tigers avoid bug bites, beat the heat, and keep an eye out for dinner by spending a good part of the day up to their necks in water.



Just tell him you're the dental hygienist.



Can I go play yet?

The deadly moray eel lets little wrasse fish swim in and out of its mouth to dine on parasites and diseased tissue. The wrasse gets a meal; the moray, a cleaning.

Monkeys, gorillas, and chimpanzees spend hours every day grooming each other, picking off pesky little biting insects.



Rhesus monkeys

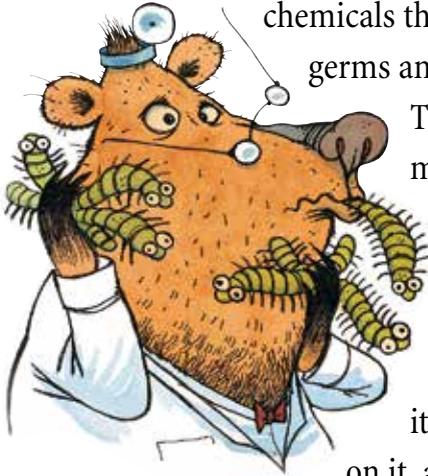
Tip #4 Try a Bug Rub

In Venezuela, capuchin monkeys repel bugs with—another bug. They seek out millipedes, which make

chemicals that repel germs and insects.

To get a millipede to release its toxin, a capuchin will rub it, roll over it, and slide

it in and out of its mouth like a gummy worm—with lots of drooling to spread the chemicals around.



Monkeys that don't have a millipede of their own rub up against their drool-covered friends.

Many birds rub ants into their feathers. Usually a bird squishes the ant in its bill then rubs the ant over its body. Some birds get ants to crawl around in their feathers by plopping down on ant mounds. Squirrels, cats, and monkeys have also been seen “anting.” Ants give off formic acid—a poisonous chemical that kills lice and mites.

Have you had your bug rub today?



For capuchin monkeys, a millipede down the back is just good medicine.

Tip #5 Make Your Own Medicine

Navajo and Blackfoot Indians saw bears dig up osha root, chew it, and smear the gooey mixture into their fur so often that they called the plant “bear medicine.” Scientists today know the osha plant produces chemicals that kill bacteria and numb pain.

During the rainy season in Costa Rica, when skin pests are especially bothersome, researcher Mary Baker watched capuchin monkeys engage in a fur-rubbing frenzy. They chewed clematis stems, pepper leaves, and other plants to make a plant-saliva mixture, then rubbed it all over their bodies. Baker says, “They really get into it, drooling like crazy, spit flying everywhere.” Sure enough, these plants are full of chemicals that kill insects.



So—my hobby has medicinal value.





Both oryx and elephants agree—termite-mound dirt really hits the spot.

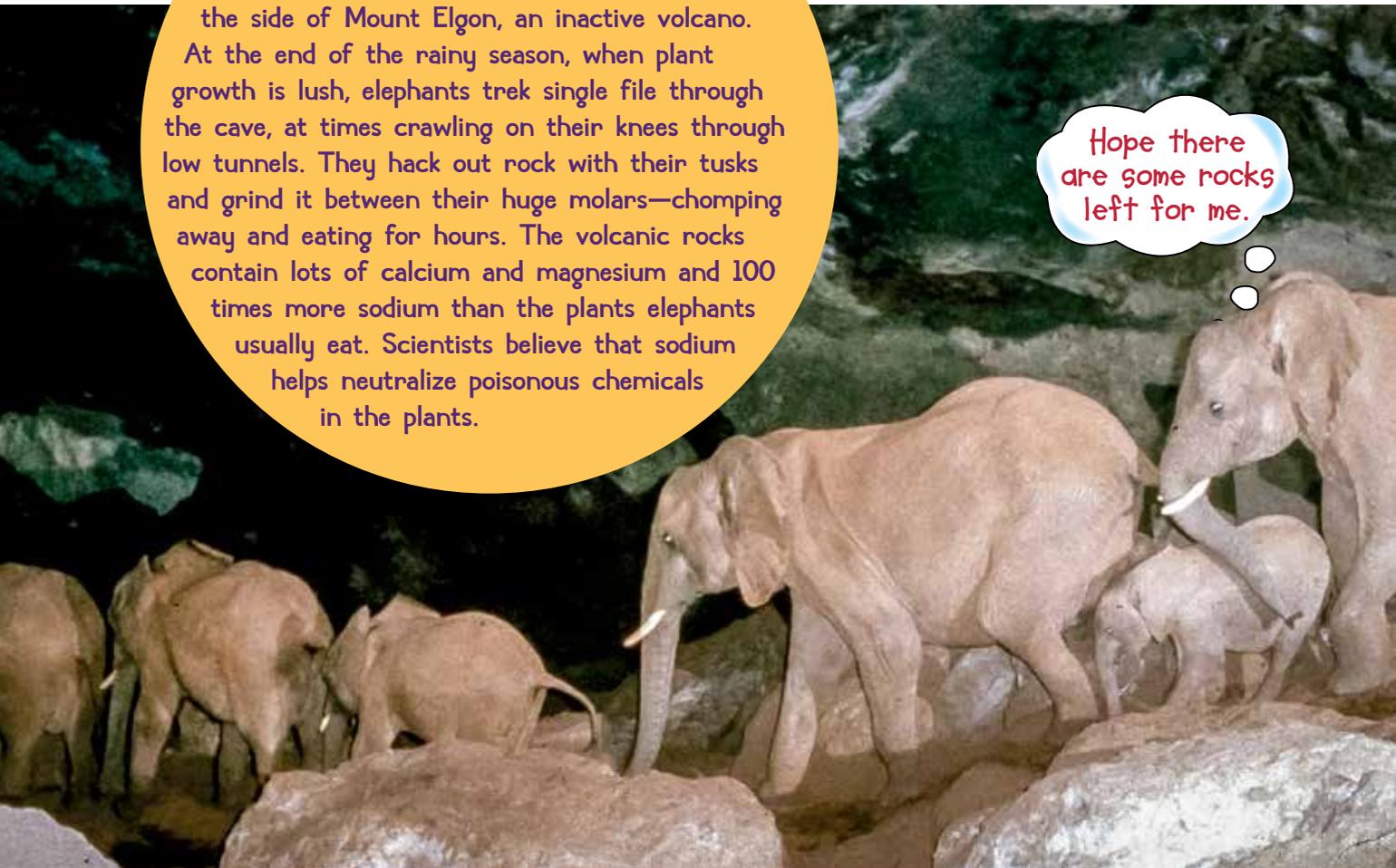


Tip #6—Eat Dirt

Out on the African savannas, many animals (and some people) know a great cure for stomach aches—munching termite mounds. Termite-mound dirt is rich in clay, which helps soothe upset stomachs and stop diarrhea. Clay can also help neutralize poisons in food. And soil is a good source of minerals like calcium and salt that wild animals need.

Crunchy Cave

In western Kenya, generations of elephants have mined out a cave about a mile and a half up the side of Mount Elgon, an inactive volcano. At the end of the rainy season, when plant growth is lush, elephants trek single file through the cave, at times crawling on their knees through low tunnels. They hack out rock with their tusks and grind it between their huge molars—chomping away and eating for hours. The volcanic rocks contain lots of calcium and magnesium and 100 times more sodium than the plants elephants usually eat. Scientists believe that sodium helps neutralize poisonous chemicals in the plants.



Hope there are some rocks left for me.

Tip #7—Swallow the Bitter Pill

Sometimes wild animals eat poisonous or bristly plants on purpose. Why? To kill internal parasites. Small worms and other

parasites can get in through the skin, mouth, or eyes. Once inside,

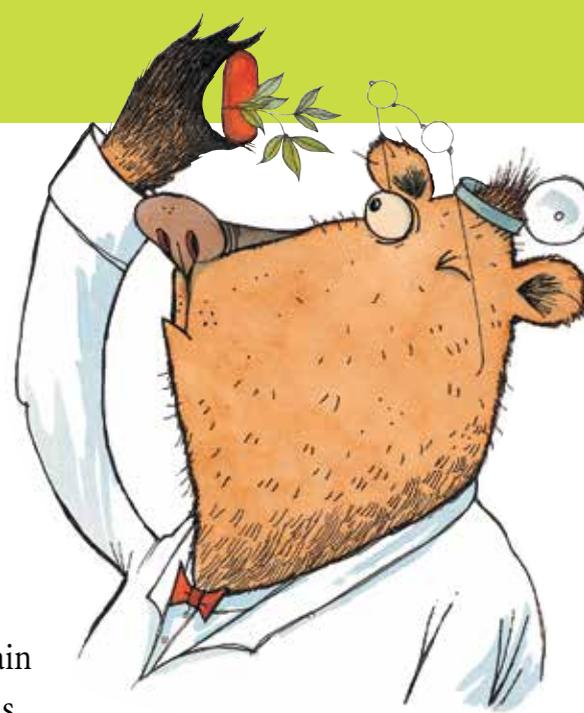
they live in the gut, nose, mouth, or even inside living cells.

These greedy freeloaders sap their host's energy. Some infected chimpanzees find relief by

stripping the stem of a bitter-leaf plant and chewing its spongy pith. These plants contain mild poisons that kill parasites. Chimpanzees also swallow rough, hairy, folded-up leaves. The leaves aren't digested but pass through a chimp's intestines, snagging free-floating worms along the way. When the chimp poops, the leaves come out almost whole, with the tiny wriggling worms stuck tight.



Does this come in cherry flavor?

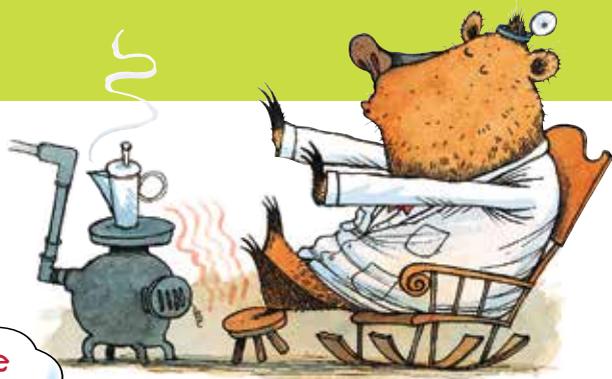


That's the choice? Can't I just take a pill?

Tip #8—Starve or Vomit

Have you ever heard the expression “starve a fever”? Many animals stop eating when they're ill. Bacteria need iron. When a sick animal stops eating, it deprives the disease-causing germs of this essential element.

Probably your doctor will never tell you to eat grass—humans can't digest grass, and it will only make you sick. But sometimes dogs and cats will eat grass, and then vomit. Vomiting helps animals purge bad germs and poisons from their bodies.



How come I never tan?

Tip #9 Make those Germs Sweat

Another way animals help themselves when they're sick is to raise their body temperature. High temperatures can kill germs. Warm-blooded animals (like us) get germ-fighting fevers. Cold-blooded critters like turtles, toads, and lizards seek out logs or rocks heated by the sun. Fish infected with bacteria move to warmer waters. Even ants and flies bask on sun-baked plants to get rid of germs and molds.



Green sea turtle



I feel better already.

Extra-hot rocks will help this agama lizard shake off a virus.

Tip #10 Don't Live Like Humans!

In the wild, baboons spend almost half their day searching for food. They eat a lot of healthy fresh greens, fruit, and bugs, with very little sugar, salt, and fat. But given the chance, they easily become like human couch potatoes.

As more people visit Masai Mara National Reserve on the Serengeti Plains in Kenya, waste dumps have sprung up to get rid of garbage from the hotels. It didn't take the baboons long to find out they could sleep until the garbage truck arrived, gorge themselves on hotel leftovers, then chill



I'm NOT listening!

out the rest of the day. Unfortunately, researchers noticed some troubling changes in the park's baboons after they started eating people food. Baboon youngsters matured sooner and weighed more. Blood tests showed more heart disease and diabetes.

Animals have many ways to take care of themselves in the wild. But like humans, they don't always eat healthy when junk food is easy to get. 🍷

Wow! They threw this stuff out?



Easy food is not always good food.

Baboon