

Chinese herbs 101



You've heard about them, but how do they differ from "ordinary" herbs? Here we bust the myths while helping you understand how these unique formulations can help your animal companion.

BY LISA RICCIOTTI

What exactly are Chinese herbs? What's so special about them? You've probably heard plenty of treatment stories that sound nearly miraculous – chronic skin problems clear up, an arthritic animal recovers his step, an aggressive dog regains his equilibrium. But if something sounds too good to be true, is it? How can you decide if Chinese herbs are the latest greatest thing, or just another passing fad?

To separate myth from fact, we turned to Dr. Christine Bessent, a veterinarian with a wealth of training and knowledge in Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine (TCVM). At her thriving practice in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, she uses an integrative approach that combines the best of both conventional and alternative medicine. After ten years of success with Chinese herbs, Dr. Bessent founded Herbsmith Inc. in 2000 so she could share these unique herbal solutions with others.

Myth #1:

Chinese herbs are a "New Age" fad

Although the use of Chinese herbs is relatively recent

in North America, there's nothing new about them. They're part of an ancient approach to wellness called Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) that originated in China thousands of years ago. As a whole, TCM's overall philosophy encompasses a broad range of approaches, including acupuncture, massage and dietary therapy as well as Chinese herbs. When its principles are applied to animal wellness, the discipline is called Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine (TCVM).

"We've become so reliant on pharmaceuticals that many think herbs are folklore," says Dr. Bessent. "But TCVM is more than that. It's a medical system that looks beyond symptoms to address the root causes of illness, while supporting good health. Using Chinese herbs proactively pays off since people can deal with an animal's issues before they become severe."

Myth #2:

You must choose between Chinese herbal treatment or veterinary care

There's no need for an either/or decision. "Both have

their place," says Dr. Bessent. "We're now fortunate that we can add TCVM and Chinese herbal use to conventional veterinary medicine. Using Chinese herbs often lets a vet decrease the amount and/or frequency of stronger pharmaceutical drugs that have harsh side effects."

This is especially important when an animal needs long term support, as is often the case with arthritis. A dog can enjoy the benefits of Chinese herbs for years, without the negative side effects that come from drugs like Metacam, which can be held in reserve for times when pain is most severe. "Chinese herbs let you save 'the big guns' for when you need them," Dr. Bessent notes.

Generally, Chinese herbal treatments are used for chronic, long-standing problems and work more slowly than drugs. "If your dog or cat is hit by a car, go straight to emergency!" says Dr. Bessent. "Any life-threatening, sudden onset or acute illness or injury is very suited to Western veterinary medicine. Once the immediate threat is over, Chinese herbs may then be used as part of the healing process."

Myth #3:

Veterinarians are against the use of Chinese herbs

Again, it's not a black-or-white situation. "TCVM techniques like herbs or acupuncture aren't included in a vet's regular training," explains Dr. Bessent. "So unless vets take additional training, they're not familiar with it. If you go to regular vets and ask for Chinese herbs, most can't give you an informed answer and are too busy to find out more for you."

Finding a vet with a holistic approach can be challenging, but numbers are growing. "It's due in large part to a grassroots demand from animal owners over the past two decades," says Dr. Bessent. A good place to start is the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association (AHVMA). Their website ahvma.org offers a directory for holistic vets in the U.S. and Canada.

Myth #4:

Chinese herbs aren't drugs, so anyone can put together a treatment plan for their animal

When it comes to official health regulatory bodies, herbs often fall into a gray area between food and drugs, running the gamut from common seasonings like cinnamon and turmeric to more powerful prescription herbs.

Using Chinese herbs properly isn't a straight line between an herb and its effect, as is often the approach in Western herbology. "A treatment doesn't necessarily consist of just one herb; it could be many formulated together," says Dr. Bessent. Knowing the right combinations comes with understanding the principles behind TCVM, and isn't learned overnight. Dabbling without real knowledge can do more harm than good.

"The ideal is always to have a knowledgeable professional guiding you," advises Dr. Bessent. "It could be a TCVM-trained vet, or an individual with TCM training willing to work with your vet." It's also important to make your current vet aware of any Chinese herbal treatments your animal is taking, since some could react with prescribed drugs.

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Herbsmith offers herbal formulas based on traditional Chinese theories of health and wellness. Dr. Chris Bessent, practicing holistic veterinarian and founder of Herbsmith, developed these formulas as a natural option to support health for everything from allergies and aches to calming and joint support.



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Myth #5:

All Chinese herbs come from China

Originally, all herbs used in Traditional Chinese Medicine were native to China since that's where the practice originated. Even today, most of the over 6,000 species of plants used in TCVM continue to come from China or other Asian countries. But it's also possible that your animal's "Chinese" herbal mixture could contain plants grown in North America or other countries. "Today the phrase 'Chinese herbs' is used more to describe the philosophy behind their use rather than the country of origin," says Dr. Bessent.

Purists maintain that China is still the best source of "Chinese" herbs, but given the right soil, climate and cultivation methods, it's now possible to obtain equally potent results beyond China's borders. What's most important is that an herbal supplier has good quality control procedures to back up their claims about product potency.

Because Chinese herbs include thousands of different plants, most of which work best in various combinations, it's important to ally yourself with a vet who is well-versed in TCVM. Used by someone with knowledge and experience, Chinese herbs can be profoundly healing. 🐾

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HEALING APPLICATIONS

Chinese herbs can be used for a multitude of problems, including allergies, arthritis, anxiety, immune system support and many others.

1. Quelling anxiety

After standing close to an electrical pole that loudly short-circuited, a male Australian shepherd developed a severe fear of noise. His people worried as his anxiety levels grew and he began to fear-bite. Two months on a mixture of Chinese herbs returned this boy to his happy self.

2. Supporting immunity

When veterinary experts said nothing more could be done for their 11-year-old Rottweiler, his family turned to Dr. Bessent. The dog had contracted an often-fatal fungal infection after plunging into tainted water to escape another dog that bit him. He received anti-fungal drugs, but wasn't responding. With the help of Chinese herbs, his immune system rallied enough to beat the blastomycosis.

3. Making IBD bearable

Abby, a five-year-old golden retriever, was skin and bones. A chronic irritable bowel disease (IBD) sufferer, she had constant diarrhea and gas and could only tolerate broth and rice. As a last resort, her people tried a Chinese herbal treatment. Now Abby's a new dog. She can eat whatever she likes as long as she keeps taking her herbs.