

# African mothers doctor themselves

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In order to improve children's health care in Africa is important to find out what African mothers do when their children fall ill and what decisions they make. Mothers make a choice between regular healthcare, herbalists and their own medicinal herbs knowledge. Leiden PhD candidate Alexandra Towns researched the choices African mothers make and what treatments they use when their children fall ill. She collected 400 species and determined them in Naturalis. The study took place within the NWO Vidi project of dr Tinde van Andel.

Respiratory infections, diarrhoea, malaria and measles are the main causes of infant mortality in Africa. International health organisations are devoting considerable attention to prevention and education. But what do African mothers actually do when their children fall ill? In order to improve the health of children in Africa, it is important to know which children's illnesses mothers can identify themselves, and discover what decisions they make and how. Which illnesses prompt mothers to go to a hospital? When do they prefer to treat their children themselves with medicinal plants? And in which cases do they consult [traditional healers](#)?

Research pointed out that African mothers switch easily between modern health care, herbalists and their own back gardens, where they grow many medicinal plants. However that may be, African women's knowledge of herbs plays a major role in the health of their children and grandchildren. But culture-bound illnesses have to be taken seriously. Not only can the symptoms of these kinds of conditions indicate chronic diseases such as sickle-cell anaemia, but the use of herbs with young

children can be dangerous.

Most mothers knew plants that would help to treat respiratory infections, diarrhoea and intestinal ailments. In cases of high fever or malaria, they preferred to directly seek help at a [health-care](#) centre. But there were also many cases of cultural-bound children's illnesses, which doctors had little knowledge of according to the mothers. Mothers often used herbal baths to enable their children to walk early, for example, and applied finely ground leaves to their babies' fontanels to close them, and they frequently administered enemas made of plant extracts, even to newborn infants. Children's illnesses unknown in medical literature, such as the skin condition atita, were treated with herbal teas. If the symptoms persisted, then the mothers consulted traditional healers, because they were good at treating illnesses with supernatural causes.

Alexandra Towns, a PhD student in Leiden, the Netherlands, asked 81 [mothers](#) and grandmothers in Benin (West Africa) and Gabon (Central Africa) about [children's](#) illnesses and the use of medicinal plants. After each interview, she went into the forest. Following instructions from the women, she collected some 400 different kinds of bark, leaves and roots, which she later identified in the herbarium of Naturalis.

**More information:** full article in *Plos ONE* 22 August 2014:  
[www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0105972#s5](http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0105972#s5)

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