Herb Profile

Saw Palmetto

Terry Willard, CIH, PhD

Health claims

Saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*) is used to treat prostate problems and cancer, especially of the urogenital system. (For information on how it helps prevent hair loss, see page 68.)

What is it?

Saw palmetto is a small palm tree native to North America. Its berries are used medicinally.

How does it work?

As a man ages, more male hormones, such as testosterone, collect in the prostate. This testosterone, in turn, converts into a more potent form—dihydrotestosterone (DHT). DHT causes cell multiplication, which eventually produces enlargement of the prostate. Left untreated, a certain percentage of cases will lead to prostate cancer.

Saw palmetto increases the breakdown of DHT in the body. The lipid (fat) compounds of saw palmetto also prevent the initial conversion of testosterone into DHT and inhibit male hormone binding to cellular and nuclear receptor sites. This is very significant because only alcohol (tinctures) and oil extract (soft gel) products are effective. Ground-up powdered herbs have very little effect on the prostate.

Saw palmetto berries also have anti-inflammatory and anti-edematous (fluid retention) activity. The exact constituent responsible is unknown, but it is also part of the lipid group.

What evidence supports its use?

There have been many clinical trials using different protocols (including double-blind and controls) with groups of more than 2,000 benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH) patients in Germany. Confirmation in multiple studies has shown reduction in prostate size within 30 days. Almost all authorities feel the effectiveness of alcohol or oil extracts far exceeds that of water extractions or dried berries.
A review of studies in the Journal of the American Medical Association concluded that saw palmetto was as effective as finasteride (brand name Proscar) in the treatment of BPH. Although some uncontrolled clinical studies have shown success over a three-month period, recent studies have demonstrated even more effectiveness of saw palmetto in studies lasting six months to three years.

A three-year study in Germany found that taking saw palmetto extract reduced nighttime urination in 73 per cent of patients and improved urinary flow rates significantly. Saw palmetto extract does not interfere with accurate measuring of prostate-specific antigen (PSA)—a marker for prostate cancer.

Saw palmetto extract has also been combined with nettle root extract to successfully treat BPH. Another study compared the same combination to finasteride for one year, with positive results.

How should I take it?
In tincture form, the normal dosage is 15 to 30 drops twice daily, and the lipid extract is 320 milligrams daily (either at once or in divided doses). Ground-up powdered herbs (hard gel capsules or teas) have very little effect on the prostate.

Caveats
This herb is safe. It has been used for years in Europe, on its own, with other botanicals, and along with pharmaceutical drugs with no problems. If used with pharmaceuticals, it usually aids in reducing the dosage of drugs needed.

The bottom line
Saw palmetto has proven to be excellent for the treatment of BPH and shows promise in prostate cancer treatment. It can be safely taken along with many pharmaceuticals and works well in combination with other botanicals.

References available upon request.

Terry Willard, CIH, PhD, is a practitioner, teacher and director of the Wild Rose College of Natural Healing in Calgary, Alta. He has written several books on natural medicine, including his most recent, Dr. Terry Willard's Encyclopedia of Herbs (Key Porter Books, 2002).