unwanted facial hair?

Not just for men, the herb saw palmetto helps women with excess facial hair

By Emily A. Kane, ND, LAc

Q: Is it true that the herb saw palmetto can help women with facial hair?
— Joni L., Bakersfield, Calif.

A: Saw palmetto (Serenoa repens) helps break down testosterone so that any excess, which the body can’t put to good use, can be recycled or excreted. This highly effective herbal therapy is best known for its use in helping men with benign enlarged prostate glands. However, it can certainly be helpful for women as well. Testosterone is made in the adrenal glands by both men and women, and in the testes in men. That’s why men have so much more; they have those extra production units.

Women with higher than ideal levels of testosterone present mostly with male-pattern hair growth: extra hair on the chin, arms, and inner thighs, but thinning hair on top. This is called hirsutism, and honestly, the best treatment for unwanted facial hair is electrolysis. Hair grows in three phases, and it generally takes a minimum of three electrolysis treatments to remove unwanted hair permanently. This is rather expensive and requires working with a qualified dermatologist or aesthetician.

However, many women have good success managing unwanted hair with saw palmetto, since it reduces or allows for excretion of the excess testosterone that drives the male-pattern hair growth. This is especially true if women have a “constellation” of symptoms created by the excess testosterone, including erratic menses, infertility, belly fat, and a family or personal history of diabetes or early cardiovascular disease. This complex of symptoms is called metabolic syndrome. When metabolic syndrome also features cysts on the ovaries (which can create painful midcycle ovulation) it’s called PCOS, or polycystic ovary syndrome. For my PCOS patients, I strongly recommend a high dose of saw palmetto, about 600 milligrams daily, along with pumpkin seeds (“1/4 cup daily, ideally organic), and plenty of omega-3 fats from oily fish or freshly ground flaxseeds (“1/4 cup daily). It is also advisable to avoid commercially available red meat, which tends to be high in hormones, and to strictly reduce sugar in the diet.

Many conventionally trained doctors treat PCOS with Glucophage, an antidiabetic drug that can work quite well. Improving your diet, however, is always a better choice than drugs. Avoid fruit juices, melons, candy, and sweet baked goods, such as donuts, cookies, pie, and pastries. The exception is a little dark chocolate: the antioxidants in high-cacao-content dark chocolate (above 65 percent) will offset the adverse effects of the sugar.

Q: I’m confused about soy. How much is OK?
— Willamea B., Portland, Ore.

A: The main problem with soy today is that the vast majority of it is genetically engineered. Genetic modification is a huge “experiment” on the American public with woefully little research behind its long-term safety. Biologists have already discovered that almost everyone tested already has genetically modified organisms spliced into their own gut bacteria. That means that our healthy population of acidophilus and bifidobacterium—which live in our digestive tracts and promote our immune response to pathogens and help optimize digestion—already permanently contain bits of Monsanto’s (or some other food corporation’s) engineering. Maybe this isn’t such a bad thing, since so much of our food now contains engineered material. Still, the concept gives one pause.

So if you choose to eat soy products, which is generally a good protein alternative, especially for blood type A, please choose organic only. Certified-organic soy is not genetically modified. Another problem with soy is how pervasive it is in our food. Many, if not all, processed foods contain soy—which,
unless certified organic, is certainly genetically modified. Soy isn’t all bad, however. Consider this: genistein, a phytoestrogen in soy, can “sit” on the estrogen receptors of our estrogen-sensitive cells (such as breast and uterine cells) and block the effect of estrogen on those tissues. I generally recommend 1/4 cup of soy nuts per day for women who have had breast cancer and are working to prevent a recurrence, particularly in women with blood type A, which often has more aggressive cancers. Soy nuts contain concentrated genistein and are widely available, handy to travel with, not too caloric, and reasonably tasty. I don’t recommend soy products such as soymilk or textured vegetable protein, but whole, green edamame soybeans are good. The Japanese, masters of soy food, generally consume only fermented soy products such as miso, tempeh, and tofu. They will also invariably serve these products with a generous dose of high-iodine sea vegetables, because soy is notorious for blocking uptake of iodine by the thyroid gland, and may well be a significant contributor to hypothyroidism in this country. Eating a quarter block of tofu more than three times weekly is probably too much. If you or close family members struggle with low thyroid problems, my advice is to avoid soy foods. If you have a personal or family history of hormone-driven cancer (breast, uterine, prostate) soy may help, but the research is not crystal clear, especially in the case of prostate cancer, in which a higher estrogen effect may be desirable. If you are using soy as a major component of your diet, check with a nutritionist or nutritionally oriented physician to make sure this is right for you.}

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