Saw palmetto

More than a prostate herb

Saw palmetto (Serenoa repens or Sabal serrulatum) is well known for its beneficial effect on the prostate, but it also has many other uses.

Over the last 100 years, saw palmetto has been used as a nerve sedative, an expectorant, and a nutritive tonic acting upon the digestive tract by improving appetite, digestion, and assimilation. Its actions help reproductive organs which have undergone wasting, and it can also be used to enlarge the breasts, ovaries, and testicles.

Saw palmetto is useful to tone relaxed tissue, especially uterine hypertrophy (a large, relaxed, and flabby uterus). Its ability to tone can be used to soothe irritated ovaries and relieve painful menstruation, especially when due to lack of tone.

Reduction of mucus and control of irritation of mucous tissues makes saw palmetto a helpful herb in cases of irritating coughs, chronic bronchial coughs, whooping-cough, laryngitis, acute and chronic catarrh, asthma, and tubercular laryngitis.

Saw palmetto’s common nicknames give clues as to its traditional uses. For example, “old man’s friend” suggests a connection with its beneficial effects on the prostate. “Plant catheter,” another nickname, relates to this herb’s ability to tonify the neck of the bladder and prostate.

The old man’s friend

Saw palmetto has been extensively studied for the treatment of prostatitis and benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH). When men go through andropause, the male form of menopause, more male hormones such as testosterone collect in the prostate. This testosterone, in turn, converts into a more potent form, dihydrotestosterone (DHT), which causes the cell multiplication that eventually produces enlargement of the prostate. If untreated, a certain percentage of cases will lead to prostate cancer.

The lipid compounds of saw palmetto have been shown to prevent the conversion of testosterone into DHT and inhibit cell multiplication and also increase the breakdown of DHT already present in the body.

Saw palmetto has been the subject of many clinical trials using different protocols (including double-blind and controls) with groups of more than 2,000 BPH patients in Germany. Confirmation in multiple studies has shown reduction in prostate size within 30 days. It should be noted that almost all authorities feel the use of alcohol or oil extract or straight berries far exceeds the effectiveness of water extractions.

Saw palmetto extract has also been combined with nettle root extract to
successfully treat BPH. One study using a combination of saw palmetto extract (320 mg per day) and nettle root extract (240 mg per day) showed positive actions on symptoms of BPH over a one-year treatment period. Another study compared the same combination to finasteride (a nitrogenous steroid derivative) for one year with positive results.

Although some uncontrolled clinical studies have shown success with saw palmetto in treating BPH over a three-month period, recent studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of saw palmetto in studies lasting six months to three years after use.

Saw palmetto’s other friends
In addition to its anti-androgenic action, saw palmetto berries have anti-inflammatory and anti-edematous activity (abnormal excess accumulation of serous fluid in connective tissue).

In addition, saw palmetto has a long history of being used to treat cancer of the urogenital system. Although this has not been clinically studied to date, beta-sitosterol (a component of saw palmetto) has been shown to have anticancer activities. As well, saw palmetto’s polysaccharides have been shown to have immune-stimulating properties.

The beta-sitosterol in saw palmetto might be responsible for claims that it will enlarge breast size in pubescent women, suggested by studies on mice indicating that beta-sitosterol has an estrogenic activity. Saw palmetto has also been shown to reduce female hirsutism (excessive male pattern hair growth).

There are claims that saw palmetto’s nutritive, tonic, diuretic, sedative, and antiphlogistic (cold infection) effects can be used specifically for head colds. An extract of *S. repens* was shown to possess anti-allergic and anti-inflammatory activity in rats, mice, and guinea pigs.

Clinically we have noticed that the most beneficial time to use saw palmetto is in the spring and early summer. The most effective forms are a soft gel lipid extract or tincture (30 drops twice daily), as the simple ground herb or teas are not as effective.  

Terry Willard, CIH, PhD, is a practitioner, teacher, director of the Wild Rose College of Natural Healing in Calgary, Alberta, and author of *Mind-Body Harmony* (Key Porter, 2003).