



Saw Palmetto Extract

Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia (BPH) is a very common clinical entity. Almost all men will have some complaint(s) with this as they age - 1) inability to empty the bladder completely, which can lead to frequent trips to the bathroom at night, 2) a need to empty the bladder urgently, often leading to an embarrassing public accident, 3) a weak stream or trouble getting the stream going, and 4) dribbling in the underwear after voiding.

A part of the normal ageing process is a gradual growth of the prostate due to the male hormone testosterone, and the increasing level of estrogen which seems to facilitate the testosterone's effect on the growth of the gland. By the age of 80 almost 90% of men have some symptoms. The degree of symptoms don't always correlate with the size of the gland when it is examined clinically.

Several prescription medications have shown very good clinical results with the symptoms of BPH, but can have significant side effects: impotence, dizziness, lowered blood pressure, and fainting.

Saw Palmetto Extract comes from a small palm tree from the southeastern U.S. and West Indies. The palm produces a berry fruit in the winter from which the extract for the commercial products is made. The extract contains fatty acids, and various sterols (beta-sitosterol, stigmasterol, cycloartenol, lupeol, lupenone, methylcycloartenol). It is felt that the beta-sitosterol is the most active ingredient.

The exact mechanism of action is uncertain - inhibition of the hormone 5-alpha-reductase has been postulated, but not proven, in the studies done to date. Another mechanism noted in some studies may be a change in steroid receptor levels for estrogen, progesterone, and androgen.

The extract did not affect levels of Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) in one study, this may be important compared to prescription products which can affect this hormone!

Studies: Early studies are limited due to small size and short duration. However, six of seven randomized controlled studies showed symptom improvement, and five of seven showed an increase in urine flow rates. There is a lack of standardization to the American Urologic Association (AUA) symptom index scores. These studies did not show a placebo response that studies on prescription products always have.

Newer studies in Europe have shown promising results compared with the prescription medication finasteride. Similar results in AUA symptom scores, quality of life, and urinary flow rates were shown.

Side effects: Mild effects of headache, nausea, and dizziness have been reported. High doses have caused diarrhea. No drug interactions have been reported.

Common Doses: 160 mg. twice daily. No studies have been done on higher doses.

Summary: Saw palmetto appears to be a safe treatment to try before other prescription medications are used, some patients have used Saw Palmetto as an alternative to prescription medications and received equal or better results. No trials have been done combining Saw Palmetto and prescription products, this may be worthwhile to forestall surgical intervention which can have serious quality of life side effects!!

References:

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3. Carraro JC, et al. Comparison of phytotherapy (Permixon) with finasteride in the treatment of BPH: a randomized international study of 1098 patients. *Prostate* 1996; 29:231.
4. Berges RR, et al. Randomized, placebo-controlled, double blind clinical trial of beta sitosterol in patients with BPH. Beta-sitosterol study group. *Lancet* 1995; 345:1529.