HEALTH BASICS

Saw palmetto

Saw palmetto is a berry-derived supplement marketed mainly for urinary symptoms linked to an enlarged prostate.

WHAT IT IS
A botanical supplement made from saw palmetto palm berries

WHERE IT COMES UP
Prostate symptom and hair-loss supplement labels

WHY IT MATTERS
Benefits are unproven, while side effects and interactions remain possible

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or proven treatment

WHO TO ASK
A pharmacist, primary care clinician, or urology clinician

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No medical test; independent certification can assess product quality

Overview

Saw palmetto is a dietary supplement made from the fruit of Serenoa repens , a small palm native to the southeastern United States. Products may contain extracts, powders, or oils from its berries.

It is most often marketed for lower urinary tract symptoms in people with an enlarged prostate. These symptoms can include a weak urine stream, difficulty starting, frequent urination, or waking at night to urinate. The medical name for non-cancerous prostate enlargement is benign prostatic hyperplasia, or BPH.

Saw palmetto is not a disease, diagnosis, or proven treatment. High-quality studies have generally found that saw palmetto used by itself does not improve BPH-related urinary symptoms more than a placebo, which is an inactive comparison treatment.

It is also promoted for hair loss, prostate health, and sexual or hormonal health. Evidence for these uses is limited. A supplement label may make broad claims that have not been confirmed in strong clinical trials.

In the United States, dietary supplements are regulated differently from prescription and non-prescription medicines. They are not approved by the Food and Drug Administration for

effectiveness before being sold. The amount and mixture of plant chemicals may differ between products.

How it works

Saw palmetto berries contain fatty acids, plant sterols, and other chemicals. Laboratory studies have examined whether these substances affect inflammation or hormones involved in prostate growth.

One proposed action involves 5-alpha-reductase. This enzyme changes testosterone into dihydrotestosterone, or DHT, a hormone involved in prostate growth and some forms of hair loss. Prescription medicines such as finasteride block this enzyme in a measured and well-studied way.

Saw palmetto extracts have shown possible effects on this pathway in laboratory experiments. That does not mean supplements produce the same effect inside the human body. Clinical trials have not shown consistent improvement in urinary symptoms, urine flow, or quality of life.

Products are not interchangeable. They can use different extraction methods and contain different concentrations. Evidence about one specific extract may not apply to every capsule, tea, oil, or mixed "prostate support" product.

Why it matters for your health

Urinary symptoms can affect sleep, travel, work, and daily comfort. It may be tempting to try a supplement before discussing the symptoms with a clinician. However, saw palmetto may not help, and relying on it can delay finding the actual cause.

BPH is common among people with a prostate, but it is not the only possible explanation for urinary changes. A clinician can review your symptoms, medicines, fluid intake, and medical history. An examination, urine test, prostate-specific antigen test, or other assessment may be appropriate based on your circumstances.

Research has not shown that saw palmetto prevents prostate cancer. It should not replace prostate cancer screening discussions or follow-up of an abnormal prostate-specific antigen, or PSA, result.

Controlled studies suggest saw palmetto itself does not substantially change PSA levels. Even so, tell the clinician interpreting your result that you take it. Mixed supplements may contain other ingredients, and a complete medication record helps prevent errors.

Saw palmetto is usually reported to cause mild side effects when they occur. These can include stomach discomfort, nausea, diarrhea, headache, or dizziness. "Natural" does not mean risk-free, especially when a product contains several ingredients.

What can go wrong

Symptoms blamed on an enlarged prostate can instead be related to a urinary tract infection, prostatitis, bladder stones, an overactive bladder, diabetes, nerve problems, or a medicine side effect. Less commonly, prostate or bladder cancer may be involved. Saw palmetto cannot distinguish among these conditions.

Taking it without an assessment may therefore delay useful testing or established treatment. This matters when symptoms are new, worsening, or affecting your ability to empty your bladder.

Possible problems connected with the supplement include:

There have been concerns and case reports about bleeding around saw palmetto use, although a clear cause-and-effect relationship has not been established. Tell your pharmacist or clinician if you use blood-thinning or antiplatelet medicines, have a bleeding disorder, or are preparing for surgery. Follow the surgical team's instructions about whether and when to stop supplements.

Saw palmetto may have hormone-related activity and may not be safe during pregnancy or breastfeeding. Anyone who is pregnant, could become pregnant, or is breastfeeding should avoid using it unless an appropriate clinician has specifically advised otherwise.

Seek urgent medical care if you have visible blood in your urine, fever or chills with painful or frequent urination, significant side or back pain, or rapidly worsening urinary symptoms.

Being unable to pass urine, especially with a painful or swollen lower abdomen, may be acute urinary retention and needs emergency assessment. Call emergency services for trouble breathing, facial or throat swelling, fainting, or other signs of a severe reaction after taking a supplement.

- Digestive upset, headache, or dizziness
- Uncertain strength or purity between brands
- Unlisted or additional ingredients in combination products
- Possible interactions with medicines or other supplements
- Delayed evaluation of urinary symptoms

What you can do

If you are considering saw palmetto, start by identifying what you want it to change. There is no routine medical test that shows whether you "need" this supplement.

For urinary changes, keep a short record of when you urinate, how often you wake at night, whether starting is difficult, and whether you feel your bladder empties. Include caffeine, alcohol, and evening fluid intake. Bring this record to a routine appointment.

Ask your clinician what might be causing the symptoms and whether a urine test, medication review, prostate examination, PSA discussion, or bladder-emptying test would be useful. Established BPH treatments have different benefits and side effects, so the right choice is based on your symptoms and health priorities.

If you still choose to use saw palmetto:

Independent certification can check whether a product contains the labeled ingredients and meets certain manufacturing standards. It does not prove that saw palmetto works.

- Record the brand, exact product, ingredients, and amount taken
- Show the label to a pharmacist to check for interactions
- Prefer products with independent quality certification
- Avoid combining several "prostate" products with overlapping ingredients
- Reassess whether it is helping rather than continuing automatically
- Report suspected side effects through your local medicine-safety system

Common questions

Does saw palmetto shrink an enlarged prostate?

There is no convincing evidence that it reliably shrinks the prostate. Large trials have not found meaningful symptom improvement compared with placebo, even when researchers studied higher amounts of a standardized extract.

Can it replace prescription BPH medicine?

No. Saw palmetto has not been shown to provide the established effects of prescription treatments. Do not stop or replace prescribed medicine without discussing the change with the clinician responsible for that prescription.

Does it help hair loss?

A few small studies have examined saw palmetto for hair loss, but the evidence is limited and

uncertain. It is not an established replacement for treatments with stronger clinical evidence. A clinician can help identify the type of hair loss before you spend money on supplements.

Will it affect a PSA blood test?

Research using studied saw palmetto preparations has not shown an important effect on PSA. Still, list it with your medicines and supplements before testing. PSA results must be interpreted alongside age, prostate history, symptoms, examination findings, and previous results.

Can I take it with finasteride, tamsulosin, or another prostate medicine?

Do not assume the combination is useful or harmless. Ask a pharmacist or prescribing clinician to review the exact products. Combining treatments can make side effects harder to identify, and mixed supplements may contain ingredients beyond saw palmetto.

How long should I try it?

There is no well-established trial period that guarantees benefit. Because good evidence does not show meaningful improvement for BPH symptoms, discuss persistent symptoms rather than repeatedly increasing the amount or switching between supplements.

Sources

- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. Saw Palmetto . Updated November 2024.
- Franco JVA, Trivisonno L, Sgarbossa NJ, et al. Serenoa repens for the treatment of lower urinary tract symptoms due to benign prostatic enlargement. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews . 2023.
- Barry MJ, Meleth S, Lee JY, et al. Effect of increasing doses of saw palmetto extract on lower urinary tract symptoms: a randomized trial. JAMA . 2011;306(12):1344-1351.
- American Urological Association. Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia Guideline -guideline). Amended 2023.
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Questions and Answers on Dietary Supplements . Current as accessed for this review.