



BPH - Benign Prostate Hyperplasia

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“It might start with the urge to get up in the night to urinate. It might progress to having difficulty starting to urinate once you get to the bathroom. Untreated, it might result in infections of the urethra, bladder, or kidneys. It’s no fun, and conventional medicine deals with it in ways that are expensive and can be invasive and uncomfortable. “It” is benign enlargement of the prostate gland, or BPH (benign prostatic hyperplasia); it affects nearly half of all men over forty and 75 percent of those over sixty.

The prostate is essential to the survival of the human species, but it is unfortunately positioned in a way that asks for trouble. Part muscle, part gland, and normally about the size of a walnut, it lies just below the bladder and surrounds a segment of the urethra, the tube through which urine and semen exit the body. In fact, the prostate’s primary function is to contribute most of the fluid that comprises semen, which nourishes and carries the sperm when it is ejaculated. Why it so often begins to grow in middle age, sometimes pinching off the urethra, interfering with urinary flow, and causing uncomfortable pressure in the bladder, is not well understood. Some researchers believe that excessive amounts of testosterone in the prostate cause enlargement; others point to increases in the production of estrogens (female hormones) and/or *decreases* in androgens (male hormones). The most popular current theory is that it’s an accumulation of dihydrotestosterone, which the body produces by converting free testosterone from the bloodstream, that is responsible for prostate growth.

Conventional Treatments

Conventional treatments for BPH include drugs or surgery; both have **significant disadvantages**. **The most commonly used FDA-approved prescription drug is finasteride (sold as Proscar)**. Less than 37 percent of men who took it for a year in clinical trials reported improvement in symptoms, and a man may need to take it for at least six months (at \$75 per month) to discover whether or not it will work for him. And it has side effects. About 5 percent of men taking the drug have reported incontinence, impotence, or decreased sexual desire. The prospect of surgery is no more appealing. The most common procedure is to ream out the excess prostate tissue from within the urethra (the urethral lining that is removed grows back). It costs several thousand dollars and although considered routine, carries some risk, as does any surgery. Reported side effects include impotence, incontinence, bleeding, and infection.

Herbal Alternatives

Is there a better way? European medical practitioners think so. Herbal remedies that effectively and safely treat BPH are among the best researched of the new wave of European phytomedicines—medicines from plants.

Saw Palmetto. Much of this research has focused on an extract of the berries of saw palmetto. (*Serenoa repens*), a small palm tree native to southeastern United States. Native Americans and, later, eclectic and naturopathic physicians treated disorders of the genital and urinary systems with saw palmetto berries, which also have a reputation as an aphrodisiac. Today, a concentrated extract of the berries is the remedy of choice of French, German, and other European physicians for maintaining healthy prostate function in mature men.

Clinical trials have been very encouraging. A study of 563 patients who took saw palmetto extract for only three months reported that their rate of urine flow was more than twice as great as that of patients who took finasteride for a year. Another study of 238 patients receiving saw palmetto reported significant relief of overall clinical symptoms after only one month of treatment. This research can hardly be considered preliminary. More than twenty double-blind, placebo-controlled clinical studies (in such studies, half the participants received the test treatment and the other half received a placebo, but neither researchers nor patients know which treatment patients are receiving during the course of the experiment) have reported that saw palmetto extract relieved all major symptoms of BPH. Of 505 patients who received saw palmetto in a three month trial, 88 percent of both the patients and the 112 urologists who supervised them “considered the therapy effective” after forty-five and ninety days of treatment. Except for urinary volume, all measured parameters improved significantly, including perhaps the most important: a quality-of-life evaluation by patients. Mild side effects occurred in 5 percent of the patients, the most common being gastrointestinal distress such as nausea, constipation, and diarrhea, as compared to the serious side effects regularly reported for men taking Proscar.

Saw palmetto works on several aspects of BPH. Like Proscar, it inhibits the conversion of testosterone to dihydrotestosterone. In addition, it speeds the breakdown and elimination of other hormones that are also believed to be responsible for prostate enlargement. Furthermore, it reduces inflammation and fluid accumulation.

Pygeum. An extract of the bark of the African tree *Pygeum africanum* has been shown to be effective in treating a number of prostate disorders. Although slightly less effective than saw palmetto in relieving symptoms of BPH, pygeum extract has proved more effective in treating prostatitis (inflammation of the prostate) and many improve sexual performance in men with prostate disease, according to a 1991 Italian study. Because of their similar and complementary actions, pygeum and saw palmetto are often used in combination.

Environmental Concerns

Unfortunately, neither saw palmetto nor pygeum is currently under cultivation on a large scale. Although saw palmetto berries are a renewable resource, recent demands have outstripped supplies, causing prices to soar. Even if large plantations of saw palmettos were established today, it would take four years from planting for the trees to bear fruit. There are no commercial sources for the berries at this time.

Pygeum forests occur primarily in Cameroon and Madagascar. The trees are slow growing;

those now being harvested for their bark are twenty to thirty years old or older. Although the bark can be harvested without destroying the trees, not enough trees exist today to provide for expected future needs.

Self-administered herbal remedies do not eliminate the need for routine checkups with a qualified medical practitioner. Other, more serious conditions can cause some of the same symptoms as BPH. That these safe, noninvasive herbal treatments for a common and vexing problem exist should nevertheless be heartening news to hundreds and thousands of men.”

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