

# Native American Botanics

## Saw Palmetto - Traditional Tonic of the Southeast

### Scientific Name

*Serenoa repens*  
*Serenoa serrulata*

### Botanical Family

Areaceae/Palmae

### Common Name

Sabal

### Plant Part Used

Fruit (berries)



### Overview

Saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*) berries have long been used as a tonic for urinary tract disorders. Today, preparations of the fruit of this plant are widely used to treat symptoms of prostate enlargement (benign prostatic hyperplasia, BPH). Common symptoms of prostate enlargement include urinary frequency and urgency, urinary dribbling, and delayed urination. This condition is linked to high levels of the male hormone, dihydrotestosterone (DHT). Finasteride, the standard conventional treatment for benign prostatic hyperplasia, decreases symptoms by lowering levels of dihydrotestosterone.

A host of scientific studies have been published on the medicinal properties of saw palmetto. A growing number of studies suggest that saw palmetto is as effective as finasteride in decreasing symptoms of prostate enlargement. Saw palmetto has the added benefit of not causing undesirable side effects like erectile dysfunction -- a common side effect with finasteride. Saw palmetto is also less expensive than finasteride.

However, finasteride can shrink the size of the prostate, and until recently it was assumed that saw palmetto could not do this. For this reason, experts have advised men taking saw palmetto berries as a treatment for prostate enlargement to consult a qualified healthcare provider to monitor their condition. As new evidence emerges, it now appears that saw palmetto may also shrink the size of an enlarged prostate.

### Botanical Description

Saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*) is a small palm that grows in warm climates throughout the southeastern parts of North America. The plant can reach heights of 10 feet, and its white flowers bear yellow, olive-like berries that turn bluish-black when ripened in the fall. The clusters of fleshy berries are concealed by large fan-shaped leaves on prostrate stems. These fruits are prized by humans as well as wildlife, and the thick protective covers found in native stands of saw palmetto are full of birds, animals, and reptiles. The thickets are an important habitat for the endangered Florida panther and the threatened Florida black bears, which often raise their young on the nutritious fruits.

### Chemical Constituents

Fixed oils (fatty acids and their glycerides, oleic acid, capric acid, caproic acid, caprylic acid, lauric acid, myristic acid, palmitic acid, stearic acid), phytosterols (including beta-sitosterol), carbohydrates (invert sugar, mannitol, , high-molecular-weight polysaccharides with galactose, arabinose, and uronic acid), flavonoids, aliphatic alcohols, polyphenolic compounds pigment, resin, tannin, volatile oil

### Medicinal Uses

Traditional uses: diuretic, urinary antiseptic, chronic or subacute cystitis, catarrh of genito-urinary tract, enlarged prostate, testicular atrophy.

Clinical Applications: urination problems associated with benign prostatic hyperplasia stages I and II, urination problems in subacute cystitis, catarrh of the genito-urinary tract, testicular atrophy, sex hormone disorders.

### Pharmacological and Clinical Findings

Saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*) has shown anti-exudative, anti-inflammatory, anti-androgenic, and estrogenic activity in animal studies. Earlier laboratory research suggested that saw palmetto does not act directly on the Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) level. However, newer studies indicate that saw palmetto berry extracts may shrink epithelial tissue in the transition zone of the prostate gland. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis of 21 randomized placebo-controlled clinical studies involving 3,139 men showed that saw palmetto's is safe and therapeutically beneficial for enlarged prostate. The treatment groups receiving *Serenoa repens* reported improvements in urinary symptom scores and in flow measures compared to the control group receiving placebo. As more evidence mounts, saw palmetto is rapidly becoming a safe and effective treatment of choice for enlargement of the prostate gland.

#### **Dosage Range and Duration of Administration**

Dried fruit: 0.5 - 1.0 g or by decoction three times daily

#### **Safety**

Saw palmetto is safe when taken as directed.

#### **Side Effects**

No side effects have been reported except for occasional gastrointestinal distress and stomach problems.

#### **Warnings/Contraindications/Precautions**

There are no known contraindications, but individuals taking finasteride should consult a qualified healthcare provider before taking saw palmetto. Pregnant and lactating women should avoid this herb, or consult a qualified healthcare provider before using it.

#### **Interactions**

None known; however, as noted persons receiving finasteride should first consult a qualified healthcare provider.

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Native American Botanicals  
4721 West Calle Torim  
Tucson, Arizona 85746-9746  
Toll Free: 1-800-915-8742  
Voice: (520) 883-8300  
Fax: (520) 292-1584