



# Saw Palmetto *(serenoa repens)*

- from the berries of the saw palmetto palm tree
- comes in tablets, capsules, and liquid extract

## What is it used for?

Studies have shown it may be useful in treating adult men with an enlarged prostate (benign prostatic hyperplasia or BPH). It may relieve symptoms of frequent urination, urination that starts and stops, the need to push to urinate, a weak flow of urine, waking at night to urinate, or feeling like the bladder is not empty.

Before treating symptoms, talk with your health care practitioner. Also, refer to your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*, which provides information about when to seek professional care and when it's safe to self-treat.

## How much should I take?

Published studies and reviews suggest the following dosages:

- Tablet or capsule: Take 160 mg two times a day, at breakfast and dinner.
- Symptoms may improve after several weeks and have been shown to continue to improve for up to six months.

## Is it safe to take?

There are no known drug interactions. Any prostate problem should be diagnosed by your personal physician before taking this supplement. Do not use saw palmetto if you have prostate cancer; the effect on prostate cancer is not known. Saw palmetto should not be taken by children. It's important to discuss herb use with your health care professional, especially if you take prescription drugs. Also see box below.

## What are the side effects?

Side effects are not common, but may include diarrhea, nausea, stomach pain, high blood pressure, back pain, headaches, erection problems, decreased sexual drive, and difficult or painful urination.

If you notice any side effects, stop taking saw palmetto and call your health care professional. You may report side effects directly to the FDA MedWatch at **1-800-FDA-1088** or on the Internet at [www.fda.gov/medwatch](http://www.fda.gov/medwatch).

## Questionable claims

Be aware that some herbal manufacturers make product claims without any proof that their claims are true. It has not been proven that saw palmetto increases sexual drive or sperm count, acts as a diuretic, or relieves bladder or genital soreness; nor has it been shown to reverse atrophy (shrinkage) of the testes, enlarge women's breasts, or promote hair growth.

## Do not use this supplement if you

- have prostate cancer.
- have a surgery or other procedure scheduled. Some herbs may cause bleeding problems or interfere with anesthesia. Stop taking herbs two weeks before any procedure.
- plan to become pregnant, are pregnant, or are breastfeeding.

# Herbal medicine: safety and quality matter

## Safety issues

In recent years there has been increasing interest in and use of herbal products. Many people think that because “it’s natural, it must be safe.” However, anything that has possible *good effects* also has *side effects*. In fact, some herbs can cause sickness and even death. For example, ephedra/ma huang, used as a decongestant and appetite suppressant, is known to cause heart and blood pressure problems. Research on herbal effectiveness, side effects, and herb-drug interactions is only now beginning.

## Quality issues

In the United States, herbal products are not categorized as drugs, so they are not regulated by our government. They do not have to be tested for safety or purity by manufacturers, and studies have shown that the amount of herb can range from 0 percent to 150 percent of the amount claimed on the label. The herb in the bottle may even differ from the herb on the label. Here are some of the other problems that can occur:

- Toxicity from the herb (the herb makes you sick)
- Contaminated with microorganisms (the herb causes infection)
- Contaminated with pesticides (pesticide used on the herb makes you sick)
- Imported herbal products may have prescription drugs added

## Herbs at Kaiser Permanente

- Kaiser Permanente carries only herb categories for which some evidence exists to show that the herbs may be effective to treat certain medical conditions. However, they are not required to go through FDA approval.
- As your partner in health, we encourage you to read this summary of currently available information. If you have any questions, talk with your health care professional.

## Before you self-treat

Before treating symptoms, refer to your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*, which provides information about when to seek professional care and when it’s safe to self-treat.

If you have further questions, talk with your personal physician or your pharmacist, or visit your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Department. For more information, you can order a free copy of our *Healthwise Handbook* by calling **1-800-464-4000** (English), **1-800-788-0616** (Spanish), or **1-800-777-1370** (TTY).

Consult a trusted information source such as Kaiser Permanente Online [www.kponline.org](http://www.kponline.org), our national members-only Web site, or the National Institutes of Health on the Web at [nccam.nih.gov](http://nccam.nih.gov).

*This herb data is provided for informational purposes only. This is not an endorsement of any product nor is it meant to substitute for the advice provided by physicians or other health care professionals. The information herein should not be used to diagnose or treat any health problem or disease.*

