



Letter to the editor: The Pundit Speaks
By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.
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"Prostate Enlargement, Supplements, and Lies?"

About half of men in the US over age 50, and 75 percent by age 80 are affected by prostate enlargement. An enlarged prostate can make it difficult to urinate and can cause urinary tract infections. A new randomized study from the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston reported that an herbal supplement, saw palmetto, that is widely sold in the United States and Europe to relieve urinary symptoms in men with an enlarged prostate, has no benefit over a placebo. In fact, even at the highest dose (960 milligrams) saw palmetto fared no better than placebo. Actually, saw palmetto extract was no better than placebo for any of the other outcomes, including measures of urinary bother, painful urination, excessive urination at night, measures of sexual function, continence, sleep quality and symptoms of prostatitis (inflammation of the prostate). Saw palmetto extract comes from the berries of the saw palmetto dwarf plant tree. Researchers said, "These supplements are apparently not doing anything measurably above and beyond what we call the placebo effect." Still, the placebo effect can be strong, as the men in the study did tend to experience a slight improvement in symptoms, but the trend was observed in the dummy pill group as well. I have studied dietary supplements rigorously for over a decade and the results are surprisingly the same. When the supplements are put to randomized controlled trials, the gold-standard, they fail miserably and frequently are associated with harmful side effects. Unfortunately, those who speak out against the \$28 billion industry are accused of trying to shut down the supplement industry in favor of the pharmaceutical companies. Ironically, the pharmaceutical companies own a significant portion (some say over 50%) of the supplement industry. Even approved and tested drugs kill over 106,000 people annually but the supplements have no requirements for efficacy or safety testing. Supplements are categorized as "foods" and not as drugs, even though they make glorified-sounding medical claims. Fortunately, the saw palmetto showed no harmful side effects but that has not been the case for the common antioxidant supplements, which are so forcefully marketed. So, for those who believe they have found benefit, there is little down side, other than wasting one's money on something no better than sugar pills. Also, just because something is called "natural" doesn't mean very much because it is an abused term similar to the term, "organic." You can't always believe what you read or see on TV. Check these things out for yourself and then decide.

In the America that I love, we must try to educate ourselves on the safety and/or effectiveness of dietary supplements. Broadcast and print media are filled with deceptive and outright lies. Watch your wallet!

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