

Pumpkin seed oil may help with urinary issues



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DOES IT WORK? Pumpkins and men's health

WHILE PUMPKINS don't receive much attention in Ireland, they can be found all over the place in the US at this time of the year. Having been carved up as Jack-o-lanterns for Halloween, they will soon appear as pumpkin pies for the traditional Thanksgiving dessert at the end of November.

If you have ever carved up a pumpkin, you will know they are loaded with seeds. Sometimes these are roasted to give a crunchy snack, but they have also been used medicinally.

Pumpkin seed oil can be extracted from the seeds and contains a number of fatty acids, vitamins and other ingredients. It is receiving much attention as a potential treatment for benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH). This condition becomes more common as men enter their 50s and get older. It arises when the prostate gland becomes swollen and can lead to difficulties urinating, especially at night, and can be very painful. Urinary infections and other kidney problems may develop also, but it is not believed to lead to prostate cancer. Pharmaceutical treatments are available, but have side effects.

Herbal remedies such as saw palmetto and pygeum are sometimes recommended for BPH, and products combining pumpkin seed oil with these herbs are becoming more popular.

Pumpkin seed oil contains numerous fatty acids, some of which are antioxidants. Animal studies have shown that some of these compounds can stimulate urination. Such an effect would help to relieve some of the pressure with BPH, but without directly affecting the enlarged size of the prostate.

A large German study gave a pumpkin seed extract to more than 2,000 men with BPH. After three months, the men's urinary symptoms had improved significantly, as had their scores on a quality of life questionnaire.

However, this study did not include a control group, so the strength of its evidence is somewhat limited. Another small study used a product containing an extract made from pumpkin seeds and dwarf palm plants. Urinary symptoms were improved significantly in the men taking the extract compared with those taking a placebo.

However, another small study found that pumpkin seed extract did not affect the rate of growth of the prostate gland. A lot more research into pumpkin seed oil is needed before it can be recommended for the treatment of BPH.

Pumpkins and pumpkin seeds are edible and generally safe. Adverse effects have not been reported by those taking extracts, although people can be allergic to pumpkins and squashes. In such cases, close monitoring is needed when first trying these extracts.

While BPH can be part of normal ageing, the same symptoms can sometimes arise for more serious reasons. Therefore, symptoms of BPH should always be thoroughly investigated. Underlying problems such as gastrointestinal disorders, infections or pancreatic cancer should be investigated medically.

Herbal remedies should not be used as a replacement for a thorough medical check-up.

Overall, the quantity and quality of evidence does not allow firm recommendations to be made regarding pumpkin seed oil and BPH. The oil contains several fatty acids and antioxidants which are generally healthy.

About 500mg of oil per day is usually recommended, although different products have been found to vary widely in the contents of their oil.

As part of an overall healthy diet, the oil may provide helpful nutrients. Men with BPH symptoms may find some general benefit from the oil, although it should not be used instead of having symptoms investigated medically.

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