

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) affects one in 10 people with ovaries of childbearing age. Those with PCOS have a hormonal imbalance and metabolism problems that may affect their overall health and appearance. PCOS is also a common and treatable cause of infertility.

Some of the symptoms of PCOS include:

- Irregular menstrual cycle. Those with PCOS may have irregular menstrual periods. This irregularity may include missing periods (fewer than eight periods in a year) or having more frequent periods. Some people with PCOS stop having menstrual periods.
- Too much hair on the face, chin, chest, or abdomen. This is called “hirsutism.” Hirsutism affects up to 70% of people with PCOS.
- Acne on the face, chest and upper back
- Thinning hair or hair loss of the scalp; male-pattern baldness
- Weight gain or difficulty losing weight
- Darkening of skin, particularly along neck creases and in the groin and underneath breasts
- Skin tags, which are small flaps of excess skin in the armpits or neck area

Causes of PCOS

The exact cause of PCOS is not known. Most experts think that several factors, including genetics play a role:

- **High levels of androgens:** Higher than normal androgen levels can prevent the ovaries from releasing an egg (ovulations) during each menstrual cycle and can cause extra hair growth and acne.
- **High levels of insulin:** Insulin is a hormone that controls how the food you eat is changed into energy. Insulin resistance is when the body’s cells do not respond normally to insulin. As a result, your insulin blood levels become higher than normal. Many people with PCOS have insulin resistance, especially those who are overweight or obese, have unhealthy eating habits, do not get enough physical activity, and have a family history of diabetes (usually type 2 diabetes). Over time, insulin resistance can lead to type 2 diabetes.

Treatment Options for PCOS

There is no cure for PCOS, but there are things you can do to manage the symptoms of PCOS. You and your clinician will work on a treatment plan based on your symptoms, your plans for children, and your risk for long-term health problems such as diabetes and heart disease. Many people will need a combination of treatments including:

- **Weight loss.** Losing weight may help to lower your blood glucose levels, improve the way your body uses insulin, and help your hormones reach normal levels. Even a 10 percent loss in body weight can help make your menstrual cycle more regular and improve your chances of getting pregnant.

- Hair removal or slowing hair growth. Treatment options include facial hair removal creams, laser hair removal, and/or electrolysis to remove excess hair. There is also a prescription medication that may help. Ask your clinician what may work best for you.
- Prescription medication. Your clinician may prescribe hormonal birth control, such as the pill, patch, or vaginal ring to improve acne and reduce unwanted hair. Other medicines can block the effect of androgens or lower insulin and androgen levels. If you are trying to get pregnant, your doctor may prescribe medication to help you ovulate such as clomiphene (Clomid).
- In vitro fertilization (IVF). In IVF, your egg is fertilized with sperm in a laboratory and then placed in your uterus to implant and develop. Compared with medicine alone, IVF results in higher pregnancy rates and lowers your risk for twins and triplets (by allowing your doctor to transfer a single fertilized egg into your uterus).

For more information about PCOS, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662, or contact:

Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD),
NIH, HHS
800-370-2943 www.nichd.nih.gov

American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists
904-353-7878 www.aace.com

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
800-673-8444 www.acog.org

American Society for Reproductive Medicine
205-978-5000 www.asrm.org

InterNational Council on Infertility Information Dissemination, Inc.
703-379-9178 WWW.inciid.org

PCOS Foundation
713-487-7267 www.pcosfoundation.org

This handout has been adapted from information contained in the PCOS fact sheet from The Office on Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services.
www.womenshealth.gov