

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) Management

Having PCOS may affect both physical and emotional wellbeing. There are a number of ways to manage the symptoms and impact of PCOS and it is important to seek help for the symptoms that you are experiencing at the earliest opportunity. A good understanding of the key causes and aspects of PCOS will help you manage this condition. It is important that the health information you seek comes from trusted sources and accredited health professionals.

PCOS & lifestyle

A healthy lifestyle as first line treatment can be very helpful in managing PCOS. Even when not actively trying to lose weight, a healthy diet will ensure that you are getting a healthy and adequate intake of nutrients, vitamins and minerals. Loss of excess weight can reduce your long-term risk of conditions such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Physical activity also increases energy levels, improves self esteem and reduces anxiety and depression. Small changes (e.g. 5 per cent weight loss) can reap large rewards, including improved cycles, improved fertility and reduced risk of diabetes.

"Since being diagnosed 4 years ago, my overall health and wellbeing has improved with education about the importance of physical activity and diet... not only does healthy eating and exercise benefit my PCOS but also my future with routine exercise and healthy eating... and exercising increases endorphins which make me happy." (Emma, 23)

Physical health management

Irregular periods: The average menstrual cycle is 28 days long (between 21-35 days is considered normal). Due to high levels of androgens (male hormones) and insulin, menstruation is often disrupted in women with PCOS and periods may be irregular or stop altogether. Some women with PCOS may also experience heavier or lighter bleeding.

Regular periods help to prevent excess thickening of the lining of the uterus (womb). Long gaps between periods can lead to abnormal cells building up inside the womb. It is recommended that at least four cycles per year are needed to avoid this. Medications such as a low-dose contraceptive pill, progesterone and metformin can be given so that menstrual bleeding occurs regularly.

Increased hair growth and acne: Increased hair growth and acne can be very difficult and distressing to deal with. Cosmetic treatment is the first option and includes waxing and laser hair removal. Topical preparations, antibiotics, contraceptives and anti-androgen drugs can also be used for the treatment of acne and excess hair growth.

"Facial hair and body hair have been a major struggle. About 8 years ago I started electrolysis and this has boosted my self confidence greatly. I would hate to calculate the cost but emotionally it has been worth every cent." (Helen, 47)

Insulin resistance: Insulin resistance is where the body cannot carry out the normal actions of insulin. One of the roles of insulin is to keep the levels of glucose in the blood stable (up to 80% of women with PCOS have insulin resistance and being overweight can contribute to this). Healthy eating and physical activity offer the best approach to managing insulin resistance. Metformin can also reduce insulin resistance and decrease the risk of diabetes; this is best discussed with your doctor.

Although 50% of women know that they are at risk of diabetes and 38% think they may be at risk, 41% of women are not sure what they can do to decrease their risk of diabetes.

Weight management: Many women with PCOS have difficulties in managing their weight and this can be distressing. Increased weight makes some physical symptoms worse. A physical activity and healthy eating plan is one of the most important areas of management for PCOS. For information and advice, talk to an accredited dietitian and/or your health practitioner.

Research has found that while 80% of women eat healthily, only 38% of women exercise regularly.

Infertility management: Infertility is a concern for many women with PCOS. There are many causes of infertility and so it is important that you consult with your doctor to exclude other reasons first. We know that even small reductions in weight can assist with fertility, so if you are above your most healthy weight, then weight management and physical activity is the first line treatment. There are also medications and other treatments available. If you have any concerns about fertility it is helpful to discuss these as soon as possible with your doctor.

"I feel very lucky to have been diagnosed early so that I could tackle my symptoms straight away and extremely lucky to be a mother." (Genevieve, 33)

It should be noted that over half of women with PCOS will get pregnant without medical help. Given this, contraception is important if you do not want to become pregnant.

Psychological support

A diagnosis of PCOS may present many challenges which are likely to affect your mood, body image and self-esteem.

Anxiety and depression: If you experience extreme feelings and thoughts of fear, worrying all the time, sadness, or you have lost interest in your usual activities then it is important to go to your health professional and discuss your mood. Many treatments are available for anxiety and depression including medications as well as talk therapy. Some women may just need a few sessions of counselling while others will benefit from the ongoing support of counselling. There are Medicare rebates for seeing a Psychologist for up to 12 sessions per year. See your general practitioner for more information.

Body image and self-esteem: Because the physical changes of PCOS can affect how women feel about their bodies, it is important to seek treatment for things like acne and excess hair growth if these are of concern for you. If PCOS has made you feel self-conscious, reduced your self-esteem and/or affected your behaviour (e.g. restricted eating, obsessing over food or not spending time with your friends) it is important to talk to a health professional and/or a person you trust. Having good social support and feeling connected and valued can help our emotional wellbeing, so if you are feeling alone or isolated because of your PCOS, seek help from your general practitioner or health professional.

"When I feel fat I don't like to go out. If I do go out I normally feel very self-conscious about my body." (Dimitra, 27)

"Being diagnosed has made me more aware of my body and health. It has pushed me towards a healthy lifestyle which I feel is good no matter what sort of condition you may have." (Melanie, 31)

Where to start?

The following suggestions may be helpful in approaching your PCOS management:

- seek an early diagnosis
- treat the physical symptoms of PCOS
- discuss your mood and psychological wellbeing with your doctor
- optimise your lifestyle
- seek the best quality health care you can
- seek accurate health information to assist your decision-making

****Prioritise what is most important to you and communicate this with your doctor****

Please see the fact sheets, 'PCOS and Physical Health' and 'PCOS and Emotional Health' for more information.

Where can I find more information?

www.jeanhailes.org.au

www.managingpcos.org.au

www.posaa.asn.au – Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome Association of Australia 02 8850 9429

www.diabetesaustralia.com.au

References available on request

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your health practitioner.

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