

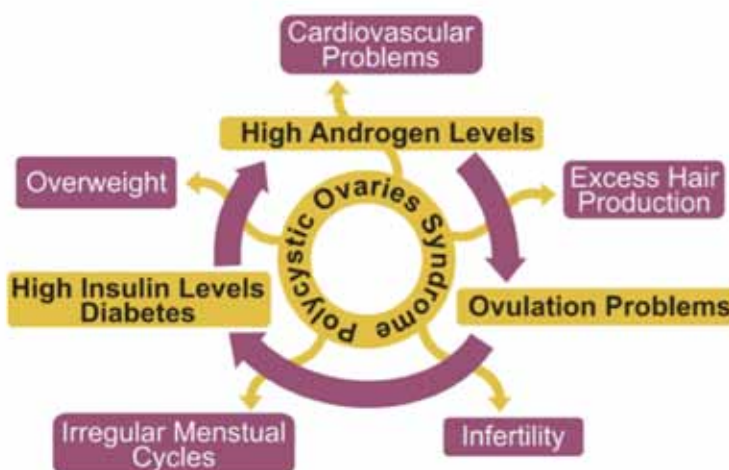


POLYCYSTIC OVARIAN SYNDROME

WHAT IS IT?

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, or PCOS, is a condition that affects about 5–10% of Caucasian women of reproductive age and about 20–30% of infertility patients. PCOS is a complex condition which can cause a variety of health problems including cardiovascular problems, high insulin levels, a tendency to become overweight, high androgen levels producing excess hair growth, and limited or no ovulation. This condition is complicated by the fact that different patients will experience different symptoms and to varying degrees. However, the diagnosis of PCOS is based upon the patient having high androgen effects and an ultrasound showing multiple cysts on the ovaries. The long term abnormality or absence of ovulation of course affects fertility and many PCOS patients have little chance of achieving pregnancy without treatment.

The diagram below highlights the complex nature of PCOS and shows how the various health problems can interact to further increase the severity of a patient's condition. For instance, high insulin levels can lead to increased risk of high blood pressure and of becoming overweight which in turn can lead to higher androgen levels therefore causing abnormal ovulation.



Therefore PCOS can be a vicious cycle with one health problem acting to reinforce the other health problems. The good news is that breaking the cycle at one point will tend to have a beneficial effect on all the health problems. The bad news is that treatment will need to be maintained long term as the opposite is also true. Allowing the cycle to reform will bring a return of the full health problems of PCOS. Therefore it is vital that a patient with PCOS regularly consults with her doctor regarding the progress of her condition.

GOALS OF PCOS TREATMENT BY DOCTORS.

- Normalise body weight
- Reduce androgens
- Lower cardiovascular risk (including high blood pressure)
- Reduce high insulin levels
- Ovulation induction in patients attempting to become pregnant



WHAT LIFESTYLE CHANGES CAN I MAKE TO GET MY PCOS UNDER CONTROL?

Although many patients will require treatment by doctors to control their PCOS, there are some lifestyle changes that can make a real difference to the symptoms of this condition in some women. It should be noted that not all women with PCOS are overweight, or have high insulin levels. It is advisable to discuss any lifestyle changes you are considering with your doctor.

1. NORMAL BODY WEIGHT.

Women should aim for a healthy body weight with a BMI between 20 and 30. A normal body weight is likely to reduce insulin and androgen levels and cause a return to normal menstrual function. It is encouraging that weight loss of as little as 5% of starting weight has been shown to reduce high insulin levels and high androgen levels in the blood and may cause ovulation to resume in some patients.

2. REGULAR EXERCISE.

The importance of regular exercise as part of attaining normal body weight should not be overlooked. Additionally, regular exercise also has the advantage of lowering cardiovascular risk and also has many other health benefits.

3. DIET AND INSULIN LEVELS.

Although there have been limited studies on diet and PCOS, it has been shown that lowering carbohydrate intake and having a relatively high protein diet is likely to reduce insulin levels. It is advisable therefore to minimise the intake of simple sugar carbohydrates such as those found in biscuits, cakes, sweets, and white bread. However complex carbohydrates such as those in multigrain bread, oats, or other wholegrain cereals should be part of a balanced, healthy diet. Increasing the protein in the diet should focus on lean meats, fish, eggs, legumes, and low fat dairy products. Limiting fat intake in the diet is an important part of maintaining a healthy body weight. However, it is important to have a balanced diet including a wide range of vegetables and fruits and nuts.

4. FERTILITY.

Although spontaneous pregnancy may occur, many patients require treatment with fertility drugs and sometimes IVF in order to achieve pregnancy.

CONCLUSION.

Polycystic ovarian syndrome is a complex condition which poses significant challenges for both the patients who suffer from it and the doctors who try to treat it. By focusing on the aims of therapy with a combination of lifestyle modifications and drug treatment real improvements in both fertility and long term health outcomes can be achieved.