



POLYCYSTIC OVARY SYNDROME

What Is Polycystic Ovary Syndrome?

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) affects about 1 in 10 women. PCOS is a leading cause of infertility and irregular periods. The cause of PCOS is unknown, but it may run in families.

How Does PCOS Affect My Body?

PCOS got its name because many women with PCOS have changes in their ovaries that look like small cysts (see [Figure 1](#) on the reverse side of this handout). The real problem with PCOS is that it changes how your body reacts to some hormones, like insulin. The body uses insulin to turn food, especially sugar, into energy. Women who have PCOS can find it harder to use insulin well. This causes more insulin to be made. High levels of insulin cause more androgens (male hormones) to be made in a woman's body. All women have some androgens. Women with higher levels of androgens can show some male signs like acne or extra hair on the face or body.

Another sign of PCOS is weight gain, especially around the middle of the body (apple shape). The hormone changes can keep a woman from having an ovum (egg) released from her ovary every month which can cause her to skip periods or have problems getting pregnant. Too much insulin also can cause the skin in the neck, armpits, or groin to become darker than the rest of the body.

Health Risks With PCOS

Because women with PCOS do not use insulin well and often are overweight, they are more likely to get diabetes or have heart problems. Women with PCOS may also have a condition called metabolic syndrome. People with metabolic syndrome have high blood pressure (hypertension), a low amount of healthy cholesterol (HDL), a high amount of bad cholesterol (LDL), a waist size of more than 35 inches, and increased levels of blood sugar. Having metabolic syndrome increases the chance of having heart disease, including having a heart attack.

How Does PCOS Affect My Pregnancy?

Women with PCOS can have trouble getting pregnant. They also have a slightly higher chance of having a miscarriage or developing a type of diabetes that appears only in pregnancy (gestational diabetes) or a type of high blood pressure that appears only in pregnancy (preeclampsia) compared to the chance a woman without PCOS will develop these problems. Women with PCOS have a slightly higher chance of having premature birth or a large baby.

Tests for PCOS

If you think you have PCOS, it is a good idea to see a health care provider. Many other diseases have the same symptoms as PCOS. A sonogram of your ovaries may show many small fluid-filled sacs (cysts) in a pearl necklace-like pattern. Blood tests are also used to find out if you have PCOS.

What Is the Treatment of PCOS?

There is no cure for PCOS, but there are medicines and other treatments that can help and decrease the chance of other problems. These include drugs to treat high cholesterol and diabetes. Birth control pills often are the first choice of treatment if a woman has PCOS and does not want to get pregnant. Medicines are available to help women release eggs (ovulate) to get pregnant.

For women who are overweight, the first step is to lose weight by eating less and exercising. Losing weight helps the body use insulin better. Many women will start to have a period every month and be able to get pregnant even if they only lose a small amount of weight. Weight loss can also help decrease the chance that you will have high blood pressure, a heart attack, or a stroke.

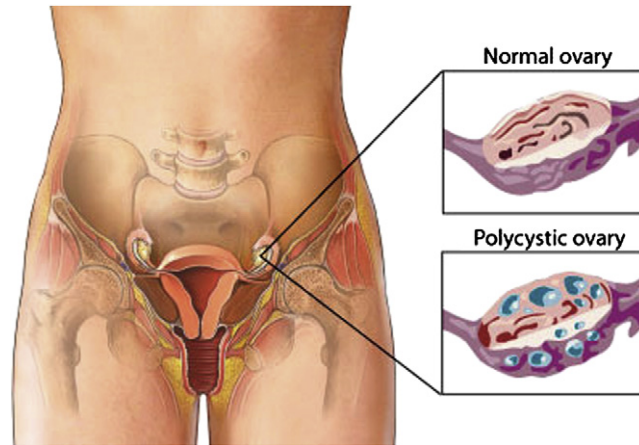


Figure 1. Polycystic ovary syndrome. A polycystic ovary has many small changes that look like small cysts. Reprinted from the Office on Women's Health, US Department of Health and Human Services.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

US Department of Health and Human Services:

The Department of Health and Human Services answers frequently asked questions from women with PCOS:

www.womenshealth.gov/faq/polycystic-ovary-syndrome.cfm

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development:

The National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development gives detailed information about what PCOS is and how to live with the disease:

www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/upload/PCOS_booklet.pdf

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