

# Polycystic Ovary Syndrome

## What is Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)?

This disorder develops when the ovaries produce too many male-type hormones (called androgens). About 5-10% of women of child-bearing age have PCOS. The exact causes are still unknown, but new research suggests that this over-production of androgens is linked with an inability to properly use insulin (the hormone involved in diabetes). The name 'polycystic ovary syndrome' is a term that has been used since the 1930s. However, it is somewhat misleading—as 10-20% of affected women do not have the many small painless cysts in the ovaries found in most women with PCOS.

## How does this affect my health?

Like other "syndromes", there are a number of different "typical" symptoms. You may experience only some of them. Symptoms usually begin at puberty and can include:

Acne

Hirsutism [heavy hair growth on the face, chest, abdomen, inner thighs]

Irregular or absent menstrual periods

Infertility

Later in life there is a higher chance of developing diabetes, problems with cholesterol/lipids, heart disease, and cancer of the lining of the uterus.

## How is PCOS diagnosed?

It may take some time to determine that you have PCOS. There is no single test to identify it, and the doctor will want to be sure there are not other causes for your symptoms. You will have blood tests for different hormone levels. Some doctors may also recommend an ultrasound to look for cysts in the ovaries.

## Are there ways to treat PCOS?

Yes! The first step (and one of the most effective) is to **stay healthy** by increasing exercise and changing your diet. Losing weight [even just 5%] can lower the male hormone levels *and* improve the body's ability to use insulin. This can reduce or resolve some of your symptoms in the short run—and in the long run, can perhaps delay or prevent the onset of diabetes and cardiovascular problems.

Other treatments are based on your symptoms, *and* on your family planning/birth control needs.

For instance, if you have irregular periods and don't wish to be pregnant, low dose birth control pills will help your periods to become regular and stop the lining of the uterus from becoming too thick.

There are also pills that often help with heavy hair growth and acne.

If you are trying to become pregnant, there are medications that can be used to help the ovaries to produce eggs. One of these (called "metformin") also may reduce the chance of developing diabetes and abnormal cholesterol levels.

## Is there other information I can read about PCOS?

Free helpful information is available through the internet:

[www.pcosupport.org](http://www.pcosupport.org) <select "What is PCOS?"> There also is "Do I have PCOS?", a patient "quiz." (This is the U.S. website for the Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome Association.)

[www.posaa.asn.au](http://www.posaa.asn.au) <select "What is PCOS?"> (Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome Association of Australia)

<http://www.4woman.gov/faq/pcos.htm> (U.S. National Women's Health Information Center)

[www.jeanhailes.org.au](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au) <select "Other Issues"> (Jean Hailes Foundation)

