

What is Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)?

PCOS is a condition caused when a woman's hormones are not in balance, usually resulting in higher levels of androgens ("male" hormones) in her system. Its name comes from the fact that some women with PCOS have enlarged ovaries with many fluid filled cysts. ("Poly" means many)

The ovaries are the organs in the female body that produce hormones and eggs. Ovarian cysts can form when egg containing cysts grow in the ovary but do not release the egg. These small cysts are not harmful, they are not cancer and they do not need to be removed.

What are the symptoms of PCOS?

Less frequent or no menstrual periods or irregular periods.

Less frequent or no ovulation. Not releasing eggs (not ovulating) can lead to difficulty becoming pregnant.

Excessive hair growth (also called Hirsutism) is usual noted on the face, chest, abdomen, back, or pubic area.

Acne or oily skin.

Weight gain or obesity, especially in the waist area.

Patches of thickened skin sometimes appearing dark brown or black on the neck, groin, underarms, or skin folds.

Less common features...

Thinning hair or male-pattern baldness.

Skin tags or tiny excess flaps of skin in the armpits or neck area.

Abnormal levels of total cholesterol in the blood.

High blood pressure.

Diabetes.

How common is PCOS?

About 5% - 10% of adolescent girls and women have PCOS. In the US, the condition may affect as many as 4 million women.

What causes PCOS?

No one knows for sure. PCOS runs in families and researchers are studying whether specific genes are related to the condition. PCOS is more common in women who are obese and who have high insulin levels.

How is PCOS diagnosed?

Diagnosing PCOS involves several steps. First, a clinician will take a detailed medical history about the woman's menstrual cycle and reproductive events. Second, you will have a physical examination. Then, if the clinician suspects PCOS, he or she may recommend blood work to measure hormone levels and/or a pelvic ultrasound to look at the uterus and ovaries.

How is PCOS treated?

Although no cure for PCOS exists, it can be treated in several ways, often with excellent results. Clinicians often prescribe the birth control pill to reduce PCOS symptoms. Birth control pills help make menstrual periods more regular, reduce male hormone levels to normal, help clear acne, and usually slow the growth of excess hair and make it lighter and less coarse. Birth control pills also protect against uterine cancer, which may be a long-term health consequence of untreated PCOS.

Special medicines, such as those that make the body more sensitive to insulin, and lifestyle changes also may help reduce symptoms. Topical treatments and cosmetic processes can help eliminate excess hair. Regular exercise and diet changes can help restore a healthy weight and reduce symptoms of PCOS.

For women with PCOS who are having trouble becoming pregnant, medicines are available to help cause ovulation, restore menstrual cycles, and improve the chances of pregnancy.

For more information concerning PCOS, talk to your personal health care professional.