



Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)

What is Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)? PCOS is a common hormonal/metabolic disorder usually consisting of irregular menstrual periods, excess production of male hormones, and multiple small cysts (“polycystic”) within the ovaries on pelvic ultrasound examination. Women with this condition often present to their medical provider with irregular or absent menstrual periods, acne/hirsutism (excess hair growth), or infertility.

What are the symptoms of PCOS? The most common symptoms are irregular or absent menstrual periods, excess body hair growth, acne, and difficulty becoming pregnant. PCOS-associated medical problems can include insulin resistance and diabetes, obesity, high cholesterol and heart disease, high blood pressure, and an increased risk of cancer of the uterus, breast, and ovary.

How common is PCOS? PCOS is the most common endocrine (hormone) disorder in reproductive-age women and occurs in one out of 15 women in the U.S. population. It is often not diagnosed until women are age 20 or greater and experience infertility. Of women seeking care for infertility, it occurs in one out of 5 patients.

How is PCOS diagnosed? Patient history, laboratory blood tests for hormone levels, and pelvic ultrasound examination may all be used to diagnose this condition.

How did I get PCOS? Studies suggest that PCOS is a complex genetic condition that can have a range of symptoms from mild to severe. Other female family members are often affected but symptoms may be so mild as to go undetected.

Is PCOS a serious disease? Most women with PCOS can live normal lives (including having children) without problem. There are many medications which can successfully treat symptoms such as irregular menstrual periods or excess hair growth. Routine health screening with glucose and cholesterol levels, mammography, etc will allow early diagnosis of medical problems.

How is PCOS treated? Young women with PCOS are often treated with progesterone or birth control pills to regulate their periods and lower their male hormone levels. Other medications can treat excess hair growth or acne. Some women with PCOS will require treatment with fertility medications in order to ovulate and become pregnant. Other problems (diabetes, high blood pressure, etc) are treated with standard medications if diagnosed by routine screening.

Is there anything that I can do for PCOS? Many studies have demonstrated that a healthy lifestyle including weight loss, exercise, and a good diet have beneficial effects on PCOS. Consulting with a dietician is often helpful. Regular medical care with a provider experienced in treating PCOS is highly recommended.

Do women with PCOS need to use contraception? Yes, unless they are trying to become pregnant. Ovulation in women with PCOS is irregular and unpredictable and spontaneous pregnancy can occur, especially in young women.

Where can I get more information about PCOS? Some excellent sources of information about Polycystic Ovary Syndrome include the following:

www.webmd.com

www.4women.gov/faq/pcos.htm

www.pcosupport.org

www.acog.org/publications/patient_education/bp121.cfm