



Bristol Menopause
& Wellwoman Clinic

Understanding PCOS





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Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) is a complex hormonal disorder that affects women of reproductive age. It is characterised by a combination of symptoms related to changes to the menstrual cycle, high androgen levels, and sometimes a characteristic appearance of the ovaries on ultrasound.

PCOS is one of the most common endocrine disorders, affecting approximately 5–10% of women worldwide.

Causes of PCOS

While the precise cause of PCOS is still unclear, it is thought several factors contribute towards its development such as:

Hormonal Imbalance

Women with PCOS often have elevated levels of androgens (typically thought of as male hormones), which can interfere with the development and release of eggs during ovulation.

Insulin Resistance

Many women with PCOS have insulin resistance, meaning their bodies do not use insulin effectively. This can lead to higher insulin levels, which in turn can increase androgen production by the ovaries.

Lifestyle Factors

Diet, physical activity, and environmental factors can influence the development and severity of PCOS.

Genetics

There is evidence to suggest that PCOS can run in families, indicating a genetic component.

Symptoms of PCOS

Symptoms can vary widely but can include:

Irregular Menstrual Cycles: Infrequent, irregular, or prolonged menstrual periods. Some women may have fewer than eight periods a year or no periods at all.

Weight Gain: Many women with PCOS experience weight gain, particularly around the abdomen, which can exacerbate insulin resistance.

Excess Androgen Levels: Elevated levels of male hormones can lead to symptoms such as hirsutism (excess hair growth on the face and body), acne, and male-pattern baldness.

Mood Disorders: Increased risk of mood swings, depression, and anxiety.

Thinning Hair: Hair thinning or hair loss from the scalp, known as androgenic alopecia.

Infertility: PCOS is a leading cause of infertility due to ovulation dysfunction.

Diagnosing PCOS

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) requires a medical evaluation. This may include reviewing your medical history to understand any symptoms, family history of PCOS or related conditions. It also may include blood tests to measure hormone levels including androgens, insulin, and other relevant hormones.

To meet the diagnostic criteria for PCOS you should meet two of the following three features:

- Irregular or absent ovulation.
- High levels of androgens or signs of androgen excess.
- Polycystic ovaries visible on an ultrasound.

Treatment Options for PCOS

Although there is no cure for Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), a variety of treatments can help to manage symptoms and reduce the risk of long-term health complications. These include:

Lifestyle Modifications

Making positive changes to daily habits can have a meaningful impact on PCOS symptoms. These strategies can include:

- **Regular Exercise:** Regular physical activity helps reduce insulin resistance, control weight, and improve mood.
- **Balanced Diet:** A balanced diet rich in whole grains, lean proteins, and plenty of fruits and vegetables can help manage weight and improve insulin resistance.

Medications

Medications that you may be prescribed are:

- **Hormonal Contraception:** Pills, patches, or vaginal rings can regulate menstrual cycles and reduce androgen levels, helping to manage symptoms like acne and excess hair growth.
- **Metformin:** this medication can be used to help improve insulin sensitivity and is used where a diagnosis of diabetes is identified.
- **Anti-Androgens:** In some cases, medications like spironolactone can help reduce symptoms of androgen excess.

Other Treatments:

- **Hair Removal:** Laser hair removal or electrolysis can help manage hirsutism.
- **Acne Treatment:** Topical or oral treatments can manage acne.

Long-Term Health

PCOS may increase the risk of several long-term health issues such as:

- Type 2 Diabetes: Due to Insulin Resistance
- Heart Disease: Elevated risk of hypertension, high cholesterol and cardiovascular disease.
- Endometrial Cancer: Increased risk if there are prolonged periods of time without ovulation.
- Mental Health Issues: Higher prevalence of depression and anxiety.

5-10% of women with PCOS will conceive naturally.





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