



3 Mount Elizabeth #11-07
Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre
Singapore 228510

T +65-6738 8331
F +65-6734 8896
dralexooistaff@gmail.com
www.obgyndr.org
Obgyn Consultants Pte Ltd
200921716D

POLYCYSTIC OVARY SYNDROME (PCOS)

This is a condition which can affect a woman's menstrual cycle, fertility, hormones and aspects of her appearance. It can also affect long-term health. The ovaries are polycystic, are slightly larger than normal and have twice the number of follicles (small cysts). It is present in 20% of women but of these, only 6-7% will have PCOS.

What are the symptoms of PCOS? These include:

- irregular periods or no periods at all
- difficulty becoming pregnant (reduced fertility)
- more facial or body hair (hirsutism) and loss of head hair
- being overweight, rapid increase in weight, difficult losing weight
- oily skin, acne and depression/mood swings

The symptoms may vary from woman to woman. Some women have mild symptoms, while others are affected more severely by a wider range of symptoms.

What causes PCOS? Still unknown but tends to run in families. The symptoms of PCOS are related to abnormal hormone levels. Hormones are chemical messengers which control body functions. Testosterone is a hormone which is produced by the ovaries. Women with PCOS have slightly higher than normal levels of testosterone and this is the cause of many of the symptoms.

Insulin is a hormone which regulates the level of glucose (a type of sugar) in the blood. With PCOS, your body may not respond to the hormone insulin (known as insulin resistance), so the level of glucose is higher. To prevent the glucose levels becoming higher, your body produces more insulin. High levels of insulin can lead to weight gain, irregular periods, infertility and higher levels of testosterone.

How is PCOS diagnosed? Signs and symptoms vary and tend to come and go. This can make PCOS a difficult condition to diagnose. A diagnosis is usually made when you have any two of the following:

- irregular, infrequent periods or no periods
- more facial or body hair than is usual for you and/or blood tests which show higher testosterone levels than normal
- an ultrasound scan which shows polycystic ovaries

What could PCOS mean for my long-term health? Besides possible fertility problems, you are at greater risk of the following long-term health problems:

Insulin resistance and diabetes If your blood glucose does not stay normal, this can lead to diabetes. 10 to 20% women with PCOS go on to develop diabetes at some time. If you have PCOS, your risk of developing diabetes is increased further if you are over age 40, have

relatives with diabetes, developed diabetes during pregnancy (known as gestational diabetes) and/or are obese (body mass index or BMI >30)

High blood pressure - Women with PCOS tend to have high blood pressure, which is likely to be related to insulin resistance and to being overweight, rather than the PCOS itself.

Heart disease in later life - Developing heart disease is linked to conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure. If you do not have these conditions, there is no clear evidence that, just because you have PCOS, you are more likely to die from heart disease than women who do not have PCOS.

Cancer - With fewer periods (less than three a year), the endometrium (lining of the womb) can thicken and this may lead to endometrial cancer in a small number of women. PCOS does not increase your chance of breast, cervical or ovarian cancer.

Depression and mood swings - The symptoms of PCOS may affect how you see yourself and how you think others see you. It can lower your self-esteem.

Snoring and daytime drowsiness PCOS can lead to fatigue or sleepiness during the day. It is also associated with snoring.

What can I do to reduce long-term health risks?

Have a healthy lifestyle:

- eat a healthy balanced diet. This should include fruit and vegetables and whole foods (such as whole meal bread, whole grain cereals, brown rice, whole wheat pasta), lean meat, fish and chicken. You should decrease sugar, salt, caffeine and alcohol (14 units is the recommended maximum units a week for women).
- Eat meals regularly especially including breakfast and exercise regularly.

You should aim to keep your weight to a level which is normal (BMI 19 to 25).

The benefits of losing weight include:

- a lower risk of insulin resistance and developing diabetes
- a lower risk of heart problems and of cancer of the womb
- more regular periods and an increased chance of becoming pregnant
- reduction in acne and a decrease in excess hair growth over time
- improved mood and self-esteem

Have regular health checks

Women with PCOS over the age of 40 check yearly for diabetes. If obese (BMI > 30) or you have a family history of diabetes, test for diabetes even before age 40. If you have not had a period for over 4 months, it is advisable to see your doctor. Discuss with your doctor how often you should have your blood pressure checked and whether you should have blood tests for cholesterol levels.

There is no cure for PCOS. However, many women do successfully manage their symptoms and long-term health risks without medical intervention.

Dr. Alex K H Ooi PKT,DJN Obstetrician & Gynecologist

MBBS, Mmed O&G, FAMS(S'pore)

FRCOG(UK); FICS; MBA(USA)