

Understanding PCOS

Polycystic ovarian syndrome is a condition that is affecting more and more women and girls – it affects 1 in 7 women worldwide, making it one of the most common endocrine disorders to affect women of reproductive age.

This is one of the most common conditions that I see in our clinic, as women are usually frustrated by the lack of conventional treatment options available to them. Unfortunately, this condition is often undiagnosed in a lot of women, so a large proportion of girls who seek assistance with their weight loss often have this condition as the cause of their complaints.

It really seems that PCOS is becoming an epidemic, and information about this condition is greatly lacking! PCOS is a 20th century condition, along with the increase of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and obesity. And the reason they are all increasing together is because they are all being caused by the same things. We'll get into what that is later, because first we should cover what PCOS actually is.

As the name implies, the presence of small cysts on the ovaries is the most common way in which this condition is diagnosed. These small cysts accumulate on the ovaries from trapped eggs, because ovulation or the release of eggs at the middle of the menstrual cycle is inhibited. Because of this, women do not produce adequate amounts of the hormone progesterone which leads to their menstrual symptoms. However, not all women with PCOS have cysts on their ovaries. This is just one of the symptoms that makes up this condition.

Symptoms may include:

- Sugar cravings
- Blood sugar fluctuations (e.g. feeling irritable or light-headed if you are late eating)
- Weight gain or difficulty losing weight, especially from around the middle
- Irregular or absent periods
- Ovarian cysts
- High insulin levels
- Hirsutism (Excess hair growth, usually in areas such as the lip, chin, arms, or lower back)
- Thinning head hair
- Fertility problems including difficulty conceiving and increased miscarriage rates
- Acne
- Skin tags
- High cholesterol levels



Diagnosis of PCOS

The condition is diagnosed by the presence of 2 of the following 3 factors:

- Irregular or absent ovulation
- High androgen levels (the male hormone)
- Polycystic ovaries on ultrasound examination

Insulin Resistance

Nearly all cases of PCOS have insulin resistance. Insulin resistance is when the cells have difficulty taking up glucose(sugar) from the bloodstream, often resulting in an increased secretion of insulin, which worsens the symptoms of PCOS. Insulin resistance is linked to PCOS because it causes imbalance in other hormones, namely testosterone and progesterone.

As I was mentioning earlier, I believe that insulin resistance is the link between these 20th century conditions. Insulin resistance can be a genetic problem, but lack of physical activity, and the food choices that we make, play the biggest role in the development of this condition. Highly processed foods, refined carbohydrates and excess sugar are the evil culprits that lead to the development of insulin resistance.

Insulin is a hormone that is secreted by the pancreas in response to high blood sugar levels. Its job is to put the sugar into the cells. When the level of sugar in our blood is high for an extended period of time, insulin is produced more and more, and our cells begin to ignore it (like in 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf'). This leads to high circulating insulin, and which is where the problem begins.

Insulin is known for its ability to lower blood sugar levels. The way that insulin does this is by storing the sugar in the form of glycogen – but the body can only store so much of this, and when it's full the sugar gets stored as fat. Insulin resistance, similar to an iceberg, has weight gain at its tip, but insulin resistance is also associated with other problems, namely heart disease and even depression.

Even if your blood sugar levels are normal, you can still have insulin resistance. It is vital that insulin levels are tested too, but they aren't always automatically done, so you may need to ask.

Fertility and PCOS

Many women with PCOS are told that they won't be able to have children. It is true that it is more difficult to conceive if you have PCOS (75% of women with PCOS have a fertility problem), but it is not impossible – not if you do something about it.



Natural Management of PCOS

The natural management of PCOS aims to:

- Improve insulin resistance
- Ensure regular menstruation
- Reduce the problems associated with excess androgen levels
- Improve ovulation and fertility for those women who wish to conceive

One of the most important parts of the treatment of PCOS is nutrition. Making some diet and lifestyle adjustments helps you to manage insulin resistance, which drives so many of the hormonal imbalances of PCOS. Aim to eat a low GI diet, and avoid processed foods. Choose organic foods whenever possible.

Foods to Avoid with PCOS

Some foods should be completely avoided as they aggravate PCOS and may make the condition worse. These foods include:

- Fruit juices, which are high in sugar, low in fibre and can make your blood sugar levels soar.
- Non-organic chicken, which have been dosed heavily with chemicals that act like hormones to make the chicken bigger and more commercially viable.
- Dairy products, such as milk and cheese should be completely avoided. Although dairy products carry a low GI index, they separately stimulate insulin production causing an increase in testosterone.
- White, refined grain products, especially white bread. These foods have been stripped of any nutritional value to leave a glucose-delivery product that spikes blood sugar levels and drives your hormones to fluctuate.

You do not need to become a gym freak but doing just 30 minutes light exercise a day improves insulin resistance.

There are some herbs and nutrients that you can take to help PCOS, such as Gymnema, Licorice and Peony. If stress is aggravating your condition, nervous system balancing and adrenal tonic herbs may be of help with that too.

The tendency to develop PCOS can't be 'cured', but it can be controlled, and the lifetime risks associated with PCOS such as the increased risk of developing Type 2 diabetes and heart disease can be reduced.

If you have been diagnosed with, or you believe that you may have PCOS you can talk to your naturopath, herbalist, acupuncturist or doctor about your treatment options. However if you start employing some of the diet changes discussed in this article you will certainly be on the right track to achieving better hormonal health.

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