

Understanding Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome sometimes called Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome is a common condition that affects between 5% and 10% of women. The syndrome is named after the appearance of the ovary which contains an increased number of small fluid-filled structures called follicles or cysts.

People who suffer from bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, compulsive overeating or other problems resulting in weight gain have a slightly higher risk of developing PCOS than other people.

What are the symptoms of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)?

The actual symptoms of PCOS will vary from woman to woman and can be present in any combination, but the most common ones are hirsutism (inappropriate or 'male' hair growth), male-pattern baldness, dandruff, acne, pelvic pain, type 2 diabetes, or irregular menstrual cycles which may lead to infertility or miscarriages. The factors that influence the development of the symptoms include diet and weight as well as lifestyle.

What is the treatment for PCOS?

Tablets or injections that stimulate the correct release of your body's normal hormones are usually used especially where restoring fertility is important.

In some cases the combined oral contraceptive or 'pill' is given. This, in effect, overrides the natural cycle, but has the advantage of preventing the endometrium from becoming too thick and causing other problems such as heavy bleeding. The pill may also help to prevent some of the symptoms caused by the male hormones; however the 'pill' will not cure PCOS. In complex or serious cases surgery on the ovaries may be suggested.

How can my weight affect my skin?

The majority of 'male' hormone is carried in the blood attached to a protein which stops it from having any action. If you are overweight then you will make less of the protein and this will mean that there is more 'free' hormone to work on the skin. However even a small amount of weight loss will increase the level of the protein and 'mop up' some of the testosterone.

A second way that your weight has an effect is through the hormone insulin. Insulin is the hormone that controls the level of glucose in the blood. For reasons we don't yet completely understand in some women with PCOS the insulin does not pass on its message very well and so more insulin is made to try to compensate. The more overweight you are the less the message is passed on. This is known as insulin resistance.

One of the side-effects of high levels of insulin is that it drives the production of male hormone by the ovaries and increases the levels in the blood. Another side-effect is that it increases your chance of having

103 Prince of Wales Road, Norwich NR1 1DW
Admin T: 0300 123 3355 Media T: 0300 123 7061 F: 01603 664915
E: info@b-eat.co.uk W: www.b-eat.co.uk

Helpline: 0845 634 1414 Youthline: 0845 634 7650

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diabetes later in life. As the gland that makes insulin, the pancreas, is working very hard to try to keep the insulin high, it eventually becomes tired and fails. At this point the glucose level is no longer controlled and diabetes will occur.

This can be avoided or delayed by keeping fit and keeping your weight within the normal range. Increasing the amount of muscle will help to remove glucose from the blood and will give the pancreas a rest. However excessive exercise can have the opposite effect and stop the menstrual cycle altogether.

Does it matter if I don't have any periods?

If you do not wish to become pregnant and you are not having treatment for your skin then you may decide not to take the oral contraceptive just to make your periods regular. This is fine as long as you do not have very heavy periods when they eventually do come. If you have heavy, very irregular periods you may increase the chances of developing abnormal endometrium. This can be avoided by regular shedding of this tissue and the oral contraceptive will cause this to happen.

What else should I do to help recovery?

Well balanced nutrition is important as is working towards a normal range of weight. Nevertheless weight loss should be gradual as rapid loss of weight almost always results in regaining or even increasing weight. About 0.5 Kg a week is ideal. You should work with experienced health professionals like a dietician to achieve a healthy and sustainable weight.

Where can I learn more about PCOS?

Verity is a self help organisation for women whose lives are affected by PCOS. They have a website at www.verity-pcos.org.uk or write to them at *Verity, The Aberdeen Centre, 22-24 Highbury Grove, London N5 2EA*

beat is the leading UK wide charity providing information, help and support for people affected by eating disorders- anorexia, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder. Details of local services are freely available to callers ringing our helplines or visiting our website.

beat services and support include:

- **Helplines:** national telephone, e-mail and text help-lines
- **Self Help:** UK wide network of groups run by volunteers
- **Information:** a website at www.b-eat.co.uk leaflets and literature for individuals and organisations details and contacts for treatment services in the UK
- **Training:** courses and conferences for health, education and social care staff
- **Research:** support for academic and clinical studies, and research trials

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