

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome:

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Introduction:

Polycystic ovarian syndrome is commonly referred to as PCOS. It is a common gynaecological problem that can affect a woman's fertility, menstrual cycle and general appearance. Having an appearance of polycystic ovaries on ultrasound alone does not mean that you have the syndrome, since this appearance can occur in up to 20% of women.

What are polycystic ovaries?

This is an ultrasound diagnosis. The doctor performing the ultrasound will see an ovary (one of both) that are usually larger than normal and also more follicles around the edge of the ovary. Up to 6-7 % of women with this appearance of ovaries may have PCOS.

What are the common symptoms of PCOS?

- Irregular periods (missing periods or even heavy bleeding)
- More than usual facial and body hair and oily skin (due to excess androgen hormones). Also loss of hair on your head (called frontal alopecia)
- Overweight and difficulty in losing weight
- Difficulty in conceiving
- Mood disturbances such as depression
- These symptoms may be mild or even severe, but more importantly can predispose you to develop type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease (such as atherosclerosis).

What are the causes of PCOS?

The exact cause is unknown, but it is thought that there might be a genetic predisposition. The symptoms are essentially due to abnormal hormone levels.

How is the diagnosis of PCOS made?

Experts recommend the presence of 1 symptom and 1 sign (on blood test or ultrasound). Before a diagnosis of PCOS is made your doctor will do numerous tests to exclude other causes for of your problem. These should be discussed during your consultation.

- On clinical examination all relevant findings will be noted by the doctor
- An ultrasound will be performed to check for the appearance of polycystic ovaries
- Hormone blood test will also be done specifically to exclude other causes and check for high androgen (testosterone levels and other weaker androgens) levels.
- Screening for high cholesterol as well as diabetes maybe done

How is PCOS treated?

If a diagnosis of PCOS is made then treatment is targeted to address your specific problem together with lifestyle changes.

General recommendations:

- Loss of weight- this will improve the hormonal levels in the body (decrease the androgen levels) and might also result in you having normal periods again. Pregnancy rates are also improved.
- Healthy diet - caloric restriction is important rather than primary diet changes. However, following a healthy diet is mandatory and together with loss of weight will decrease the chance of developing diabetes
- Drugs maybe prescribed to help the hormones stabilize and to lower the cholesterol level

- A low dose contraceptive pill might be advised to control the periods
- You will be referred to a fertility specialist if you have difficulty in conceiving
- Cosmetic therapy such as laser might be considered to enhance your appearance

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