

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Polycystic ovary syndrome

Polycystic ovary syndrome is a condition that affects women's hormones. It can make your menstrual periods less regular, and you may have trouble getting pregnant. But there are good treatments and things you can do yourself that may help.

What is polycystic ovary syndrome?

If you are diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) it means that your hormones are not in balance. The three types of hormones made by your ovaries are the ones most affected. They are called oestrogens, androgens, and progesterone.

These hormones affect a lot of things that go on in your body, including when you have your period, when your ovaries release eggs, how hair grows on your face and body, and the condition of your skin.

Women with PCOS often have small, fluid-filled swellings (cysts) on their ovaries. That's how polycystic ovary syndrome gets its name. Polycystic means with lots of cysts.

Doctors don't know why some women get PCOS. But it seems to run in families. You're more likely to get it if your mother had it.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is having irregular periods, or not having periods at all. This affects about 7 in 10 women with PCOS. It can make it harder to get pregnant, because you are not releasing eggs (ovulating) regularly.

Women with PCOS often have higher than usual levels of hormones called androgens. These can cause:

- Unwanted hair on the body and face. This happens to about 7 in 10 women with PCOS
- Oily skin and spots (acne).

About half of women with PCOS are very overweight (obese).

You may not get all these symptoms. Many women with PCOS have only one or two.

Some women find their symptoms very distressing. If you find your symptoms upsetting, talk to your doctor. He or she may not realise how much they upset you.

Your doctor might diagnose PCOS just by asking you questions and examining you. But you'll probably need blood tests to check your hormone levels, and to rule out other causes for your symptoms. Your doctor might ask you to have an ultrasound scan to check for cysts on your ovaries. But most women don't need this test.

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What treatments work?

Treatment for polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) depends on what symptoms you get, and whether or not you want to get pregnant. Some women with PCOS find just losing weight can help their symptoms, and can also help them get pregnant.

There are medicines to help with the symptoms of PCOS, which you can discuss with your doctor. If you are having trouble getting pregnant, there are fertility treatments that may help. Ask for our information, [Fertility problems: what treatments work?](#) for more about this.

Medicines

If you don't want to get pregnant and you are having problems with irregular periods, unwanted hair, or spots, your doctor may suggest you take the **contraceptive pill**. This is the first medicine you are likely to be offered. But there's not much research to show how well it works.

There are two types of pill that are often used for women with PCOS. One is called co-cyproterone (Dianette), which contains the hormone oestrogen. The other contains the hormones oestrogen and progestogen. Its brand name is Yasmin. Some research shows that Dianette is likely to reduce unwanted hair and spots.

The pill may make you put on weight. And all women taking the combined oestrogen and progestogen pill have a slightly higher risk of breast cancer and of getting a blood clot in their veins (deep vein thrombosis).

If you've tried taking the pill and it hasn't helped, your doctor may suggest **anti-androgen drugs**. These reduce the amount of androgen hormones in your body and may help reduce unwanted hair. These drugs include spironolactone (Aldactone) and finasteride (Proscar). They should only be prescribed by a specialist. You have to be careful not to get pregnant while taking these drugs. They can harm your unborn baby. You'll need to take these drugs for a long time (six months to 18 months) to see the full effect. If you stop taking them, the hair will start growing back again.

Anti-androgen drugs have side effects. If you take spironolactone, you may have very heavy periods, need to urinate more than usual, or get headaches. If you take finasteride, you may feel dizzy, get dry skin, and have a reduced sex drive. These side effects can be serious and you should discuss them with your doctor.

If you want to get pregnant, a medicine called **metformin (Glucophage)** may help control your periods and reduce unwanted hair. Metformin is more often used to treat people with diabetes. It helps control the levels of sugar in your blood. But it also seems to help some women with PCOS. You're likely to have more regular periods if you take metformin. This might make it easier for you to get pregnant. But there's not enough research to be sure.

Some women who take metformin have side effects. But these are mostly mild. You might feel some nausea or heartburn, or get diarrhoea.

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Things you can do for yourself

We don't know for certain if **losing weight** will help you to get more regular periods or grow less unwanted hair. That's because there isn't much research looking at this. But many doctors recommend you try this before any other treatment, and lots of women with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) say it can be helpful.

Losing weight will work only if you are overweight. Don't try to lose weight if you're already at a healthy weight. If you're not sure, ask your doctor.

To lose weight, you need to eat fewer calories than you use up through the day. It sounds simple, but it can be very hard to do. Calories are a way of measuring the amount of energy in food. You can use up more calories by taking regular exercise.

There's not enough research to say what kind of diet is best for women with PCOS. But some doctors think that eating more fibre and less saturated fat (such as butter and animal fat) may help.

Some studies have shown that losing weight may help overweight women with PCOS to start releasing eggs (ovulating). This might help you get pregnant.

If your main problem is unwanted hair on your face and body, you've probably tried different methods of **hair removal**. Shaving and depilatory creams remove hair above the root, just for a day or two. Then it grows back. Waxing pulls hair out by the roots, so it lasts a little longer. These treatments can be done at home or in a beauty clinic.

Electrolysis aims to damage the root of the hair, so it doesn't grow back at all. Laser treatments slow down the growth of hair. After about four treatments, the hair may stop coming back. But both treatments can be expensive and time-consuming, and some women find them painful.

Lots of private clinics offer laser hair removal. If you decide to have this treatment, make sure the clinic you choose is registered with the Care Quality Commission. Clinics providing laser skin treatments must register by law.

Other treatments

Eflornithine (Vaniqa) is a cream you put on your face to slow down hair growth. You need a prescription from your doctor. Your doctor may suggest you try eflornithine if you've tried contraceptive pills and are still having trouble with hair on your face.

In studies, about 6 in 10 women said that they didn't have as much unwanted hair on their face after eight weeks. You need to keep using the cream for it to work. If you stop using it, the hair comes back. Side effects weren't common in the studies, but a few women got stinging, tingling, or a rash.

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What will happen to me?

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) affects women in different ways. So it's hard to tell what will happen to you. It depends what symptoms you get and whether you decide to have treatment.

Symptoms can be affected by anything that affects your hormones, like getting pregnant, putting on or losing weight, or going through the menopause.

About 3 in 4 women with PCOS have trouble getting pregnant. But that doesn't mean you won't be able to have children. Many women go on to have children, with or without treatment.

In the long-term, you may be more likely to get a condition called diabetes. This may be because women with PCOS have trouble regulating the amount of sugar in their blood. This happens to between 1 in 100 and 10 in 100 women with PCOS. This may be more likely if you are overweight.

Where to get more help

In the UK, a charity called Verity offers support for women with PCOS. For more information, you may want to look at their website <http://www.verity-pcos.org.uk>.

This information is aimed at a UK patient audience. This information however does not replace medical advice. If you have a medical problem please see your doctor. Please see our full Conditions of Use for this content <http://besttreatments.bmj.com/btuk/about/12.html>.

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