



Nutrition and Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)



It is estimated that 20 - 30% of women in the UK have polycystic ovaries, but only 10 - 15% have polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). Polycystic ovaries are often enlarged and contain many small cysts.

Symptoms of PCOS include:

- Irregular or absent periods
- Excessive hair (hirsutism) particularly on the face, chest or stomach
- Thinning of scalp hair or male-pattern baldness
- Acne
- Difficulty in maintaining a healthy body weight
- Fertility problems (difficulty conceiving)

PCOS can be diagnosed by any combination of blood test results, an ultrasound scan or from a history of symptoms. Sometimes the cysts may not be seen during a scan but a diagnosis can still be made using symptoms and blood test results.

PCOS and insulin resistance

Insulin is a hormone made in the pancreas which helps the body use energy from food. Insulin resistance occurs when the body does not respond to normal levels of insulin and this results in more insulin production. High levels of insulin encourage the body to store fat which can lead to weight gain. As weight goes up, insulin resistance increases.

Insulin also promotes the production of testosterone in the body. Testosterone is often thought of as a male hormone but women need a small amount. However, having even slightly higher amounts can upset the balance of hormones in the body and lead to acne, excess hair and irregular periods. Irregular periods may result in infertility.

Long term health concerns associated with PCOS are linked to insulin resistance and include heart disease and diabetes.

Risk factors include:

- Altered levels of fats in the blood
- High blood pressure
- Being overweight and, in particular, having lots of fat around your middle.

The symptoms of PCOS can be controlled using a combination of lifestyle changes, cosmetic measures and medication. Studies show that physical activity and weight loss are the most effective ways to improve insulin resistance and symptoms.

What do you need to do with your diet?

It has been shown that even a 5% reduction in body weight can improve symptoms for overweight women with PCOS. The best way to lose weight is unclear and different things work for different people. Some women find slimming clubs helpful, some like to count calories or use meal replacements and others find cutting down portion sizes can help. The most important thing is finding something which suits your lifestyle without missing out on important foods.

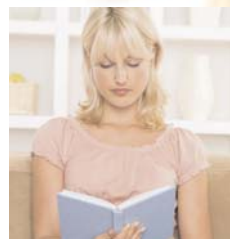
For more information on healthy eating, check out the BDA factsheet titled 'Getting the balance right- a guide to healthy eating'.



What about carbohydrates?

Low carbohydrate diets and low glycaemic index (GI) diets are often promoted for the treatment of PCOS. Changing the amounts or type of carbohydrate you eat may affect insulin levels. There is no evidence that low carbohydrate diets work in PCOS and nothing is known about the long-term side effects.

Some women find that swapping some high GI foods for low GI foods helpful- take a look at the BDA factsheet titled 'Glycaemic index' for more information.



PCOS and the importance of physical activity

There are many benefits to be gained from being physically active but the most relevant to PCOS is that it improves insulin resistance. There are lots of reasons why some women struggle to increase their exercise levels including finding the time and energy to do it. The most important thing is to find something that you enjoy and can fit into your lifestyle. Build it up gradually aiming to be active for at least 30 minutes on most or all of the days of the week for heart health but the recommendations for achieving weight loss is 60 minutes per day. Remember that anything which is more than usual for you, will be a great start.

Do you need to take herbal supplements?

There are currently no good quality studies which have shown that herbal supplements such as Agnus Castus and Saw Palmetto are of benefit in PCOS.



Summary

- Diet and lifestyle is the most successful treatment for PCOS in overweight women
- Even a 5% weight loss can improve symptoms and fertility in overweight women

- This can be achieved by reducing energy intake and being more active

Check out the BDA food factsheets on healthy eating and glycaemic index at www.bda.uk.com

Sources of further information

Verity is a UK charity dedicated to providing support and information to women diagnosed with PCOS. Details can be found at www.pcos-org-uk.

PCOSUK is an organisation set up to provide information for health professionals and further details can be found at www.pcos-uk.org.uk.

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© BDA Written by Samantha Bailey, Angela Hargreaves and Pam Dyson, Dietitians, September 2007.

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