

Food Fact Sheet: Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) and diet

PCOS is a relatively common condition, affecting how a woman's ovaries work. Healthier food choices and increasing physical activity can improve the symptoms of PCOS. This Food Fact Sheet will look at PCOS and how to manage it with diet and exercise.

PCOS affects millions of women in the UK – around one in ten. There are three features which lead to a woman being diagnosed with PCOS:

1. a number of fluid-filled sacs (follicles) surround the eggs in the ovaries (despite the name 'polycystic ovaries', they are not cysts).
2. eggs are not regularly released from the ovaries.
3. higher or more active levels of a group of hormones known as androgens are present in the body.

Even if only two of these features are present, this is enough to confirm the diagnosis.

If you have PCOS you may have several of the following symptoms:

- irregular or absent periods
- excessive hair 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 getting pregnant).

Long term health concerns associated with PCOS include heart disease and diabetes, particularly if you have any of the following:

- high levels of fats in the blood
- high blood pressure
- being overweight and, in particular, lots of fat around your middle.

The symptoms of PCOS can be controlled using a combination of lifestyle changes, cosmetic measures and medication.

Eat well

Healthy eating and being active can help you improve PCOS symptoms and are very important to help prevent developing heart disease and diabetes in the future. This includes eating lots of fruit and vegetables, as well as limiting the amount of fatty and sugary foods and drinks you consume

If you are trying to conceive, it is particularly important that you have enough nutrients in your diet, and also take a folic acid supplement. Speak to your doctor or dietitian about this.

Following a low GI diet

Glycaemic Index (GI) is a ranking system, showing how quickly your blood sugar rises after eating different carbohydrates. Low GI diets, eating foods that cause your blood sugar levels to rise slowly, can be useful to reduce the symptoms of PCOS. This is because eating low GI foods can improve insulin levels.

Insulin is a hormone which helps the body use energy from food, and lots of women with PCOS are resistant to the effects of insulin and thus have more insulin in their blood to compensate. Insulin also increases testosterone levels, and although testosterone is often thought of as a male hormone, all women need a small amount. Having even slightly higher levels of testosterone can upset the balance of hormones in the body and lead to acne, excess hair and irregular periods.

You may find that swapping some high GI foods for low GI foods helpful, even if you do not need to lose weight, as it has been shown low GI diets improve the body's ability to respond to insulin in women with PCOS. Also, when combined with losing weight, a low GI diet has been shown to improve regular periods.

If you are overweight, even a small amount of weight loss can improve PCOS symptoms, including your fertility. A weight loss of between 0.5-2 pounds (lb) a week is a safe and realistic target. The best way to lose weight and keep the weight off is unclear and different things work for different people. Many people with PCOS have difficulty losing weight and often mention food cravings and binge eating.

The most important thing is finding something which suits your lifestyle without missing out on important foods or nutrients. There are many benefits to be gained from being physically active but the most relevant to PCOS is that it improves your body's response to insulin. It's important to find something that you enjoy and can fit into your lifestyle.

Summary

If you are overweight, the most important goal is to focus on making some changes to your diet and increase physical activity to achieve some weight loss and then to keep the weight off. There are many reasons why you may find it difficult to lose weight, look into different options to find dietary changes that you can maintain.

Anyone diagnosed with PCOS should consider swapping some high GI foods with lower GI options, to help improve your body's sensitivity to insulin. Healthy eating and being active are very important to prevent long-term health concerns linked to PCOS, such as heart disease and diabetes.