



Health professionals
committed to the
reproductive needs of
children and adolescents

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)

What is PCOS?

PCOS is a hormonal imbalance that happens in some girls and women. Healthcare professionals don't know why certain girls and women have this condition. In PCOS specific hormones called androgen hormones are higher than normal. There are many androgen hormones, and testosterone is a type of androgen. In healthy females, the ovaries release an egg (ovulate) about once a month. In women and girls with PCOS, high androgen hormone levels get in the way of regular release of eggs and can lead to acne and excess body hair (for example, on your face) as well as changes in periods. Sometimes healthcare professionals are not sure if a patient has PCOS. If that is the case, your healthcare professional can still treat your symptoms.

What are the symptoms of PCOS?

Girls with PCOS usually have problems with their periods - like not having them regularly or heavy bleeding. Also, girls with PCOS may have acne and excessive facial or body hair. Many girls with PCOS are overweight. Some girls have feelings of sadness or depression; be sure to tell your healthcare professional if you do.

Does PCOS mean that I have big cysts on my ovaries?

Good question! No. Girls with PCOS may have normal looking ovaries, slightly enlarged ovaries, or very small cysts on their ovaries, but these subtle findings should not cause any pain.

How will my healthcare professional diagnose PCOS?

Your healthcare professional will want to perform a careful physical exam. Your healthcare professional may also order some blood tests to help with the diagnosis. Sometimes, healthcare professionals use an ultrasound to help them understand your body better.

How is PCOS treated?

For girls who are overweight, healthcare professionals often recommend exercise and weight loss or not gaining any more weight. Weight loss can sometimes restore regular periods. Exercise and weight loss can also be especially helpful in girls who have a dark rash on their necks and armpits called acanthosis nigricans. This type of rash is seen when a hormone called insulin is too high. However, many girls and young women with PCOS may be at risk for problems related to insulin resistance and may benefit from exercise and weight loss/avoiding weight gain. Many of the symptoms of PCOS may be treated by using birth control pills to rebalance the body's hormones. This treatment helps periods be more regular, and helps control acne and facial or body hair problems. Your healthcare professional can treat acne with a cream, lotion or pill, and may also talk with you about a pill for facial or body hair problems. Sometimes healthcare professionals use other medications for patients with diabetes, high insulin, or significant excess hair.

After it is treated, will PCOS come back? Will I have problems later?

Once girls are on treatment, symptoms of PCOS are generally well controlled. Some women reverse the symptoms with weight loss. However, girls and women who have PCOS may be at increased risk for having some additional problems later on in life: difficulty getting pregnant and maintaining a healthy pregnancy, uterine cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. Even though some patients with PCOS take longer or need help to become pregnant, you should always use birth control if you are having sex and don't want to become pregnant. Your healthcare professional can talk with you more about this, so please ask if you have questions.