

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome

What is polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)? PCOS is a condition that can cause irregular periods, acne, extra facial hair or hair loss from the head. This condition can also make it hard to get pregnant. It is a common condition. About 5% to 8% of all women have PCOS. Most women with PCOS are overweight or obese.

What causes PCOS? With PCOS, the ovaries do not work as they should. They produce too much testosterone. Testosterone is the “male” hormone. All women have a small amount of testosterone. With PCOS, they make more than usual.

About once per month, the ovaries are supposed to make a follicle. As the follicle grows, it makes hormones and then it releases an egg. This is called ovulation. People with PCOS make many small follicles instead of one large one. Hormone levels can get out of balance and ovulation doesn't happen every month the way it is supposed to.

What are the symptoms of PCOS?

- Having fewer than 8 periods a year
- Growing thick, dark hair on the upper lip, chin, sideburn area, chest or belly
- Acne
- Hair loss from the head
- Trouble getting pregnant without medical help
- Weight gain and obesity - although not everyone with PCOS has this problem

Should I see my provider even if my symptoms are mild? Yes. PCOS increases your risk for other health problems, including:

- Diabetes
- High cholesterol levels
- Sleep apnea - a sleep disorder that causes people to stop breathing briefly while sleeping
- Depression or anxiety
- Eating disorders - such as binge eating or bulimia
- Losing interest in sex

Are there tests I should have? Your provider will decide which tests you should have based on your age, symptoms and your situation. Possible tests include:

- Blood work to measure levels of hormones, blood sugar and cholesterol.
- A pregnancy test if you have missed any periods.
- A pelvic ultrasound to see if you have polycystic ovaries.

How is PCOS treated?

- Birth control pills - The main treatment of PCOS. Birth control pills do not cure the condition. They improve many of its symptoms like irregular periods, acne and facial hair. Birth control pills also lower your risk of uterine cancer.
- Anti-androgens - These medicines block hormones that cause some PCOS symptoms like acne and facial hair growth.
- Progestin - This hormone can make your periods regular but only if you take it regularly. It also lowers the risk of uterine cancer.
- Metformin - This medicine can help make your periods more regular but it only works in about half of people who try it. In people with diabetes, this medicine helps to lower blood sugar levels.
- Medicated skin lotion or antibiotics to treat acne.
- Laser therapy or electrolysis to remove extra hair.

Is there anything I can do on my own to treat the condition? Yes. If you are overweight or obese, losing weight can improve many of your symptoms. Losing just 5% to 10% of your body weight can help a lot, making your periods more regular.

What if I want to get pregnant? Most people with PCOS can get pregnant. It is usually easier for those who are not overweight. Regular periods improve your chances of getting pregnant. Weight loss can help regulate your periods. If you lose weight and your periods are still irregular, see your provider to discuss other options to help you improve your chances of getting pregnant.

What will my life be like? It is possible to live a full, normal life with PCOS, but it is important to see your provider. Treatments will help manage your symptoms and protect you from other medical conditions.