

Patient information from BMJ

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Polycystic ovary syndrome: what is it?

Polycystic ovary syndrome is a common hormone imbalance that affects women. 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 estrogens, 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 women get PCOS, but it seems to run in families.

What are the symptoms?

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

Women with PCOS often have unwanted hair on the body and face, and oily skin with 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 symptoms.

If you find your symptoms upsetting, talk to your doctor. He or she may not realize how much they upset you.

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You will 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.

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.

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

Many 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 is more likely if you are overweight. You can talk to your doctor about having regular diabetes tests.

For more information on treatments for PCOS see our leaflet *Polycystic ovary syndrome: what treatments work?*

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