

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)

A guide to enhanced self-management

How do I use this leaflet?

Every woman experiences polycystic ovarian syndrome differently and it is important to pay attention to your body and to choose information that applies to you. This is a brief evidence-based guide on various aspects of a healthier lifestyle and you may choose to focus on 1-2 changes at a time, depending on what applies to you and what you think is realistic.

Please use this leaflet with the advice you may have received from your healthcare professional. The aim is to promote long lasting change towards better health that does not overwhelm and does not feel restrictive.

What is PCOS?

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is one of the most common conditions in women of reproductive age, with a prevalence of 8–13%. PCOS is a metabolic endocrine, reproductive disorder, characterised by hyperandrogenism, insulin resistance, menstrual disturbances/ ovarian dysfunction and can impact fertility. The cause of PCOS is not currently fully understood and there no cure for this condition, making long term management the only option for optimising symptoms.

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) is a common disorder of ovarian function and hormonal imbalance in pre-menopausal women.

Some women are affected by symptoms including:

- weight gain
- menstrual problems
- complications with fertility
- acne
- facial hair growth
- increased risk of heart disease and diabetes

The symptoms of PCOS may be lessened by losing 5% body weight (if BMI is above 25kg/m²), through healthy eating and being active.

A common feature in PCOS is **insulin resistance**. This leads to raised levels of insulin in the blood, and promotes symptoms such as carbohydrate craving, fatigue, sleep disturbance and higher levels of testosterone in the body.

How is PCOS diagnosed?

According to the Rotterdam Criteria, to be diagnosed with PCOS you must have two out of the three following features:

- Polycystic ovarian morphology confirmed via ultra-scan
- Ovulatory dysfunction - manifest by infrequent or no ovulation (usually manifested as infrequent or no menstruation/period)
- Clinical and/or biochemical signs of hyperandrogenism (such as hirsutism, acne, or elevated levels of total or free testosterone):
 - The presence of hirsutism (male pattern hair growth) alone should be considered predictive of biochemical hyperandrogenism and PCOS in adults.
 - Female pattern hair loss and acne in isolation (without hirsutism) are relatively weak predictors of biochemical Hyperandrogenism

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)

A guide to enhanced self-management

Diagnostic criteria for ethnic minorities may also include:

- Family history of PCOS
- Indirect evidence of insulin resistance (obesity, central adiposity, acanthosis nigricans)
 - Acanthosis nigricans is characterized by dry, rough skin that has grey-brown pigmentation, is palpably thickened and is covered by papillomatous elevation, giving it a velvety texture.

What can I do about it?

Diet and lifestyle advice should be considered, particularly weight loss, alcohol reduction and increasing exercise to help general health and well-being, as well as a variety of contraceptives which can alter and regulate your menstrual cycle. All treatment types should be discussed with a healthcare professional if you are experiencing symptoms of PCOS.

Some medications may be necessary to manage your presenting symptoms such as:

- Acne
- Hair growth
- Hair loss
- Irregular, painful or heavy periods
- Cardiovascular health and minimising development of diabetes

These should be discussed with your GP or trained healthcare professional.

Is it just about weight?

Weight can be an important factor with PCOS symptoms and overall health, particularly carrying additional weight around our middle (central adiposity) which can lead to higher risk of developing heart disease and diabetes. Body weight can also be a significant factor which impacts self-esteem and confidence, which may explain why women with PCOS are 3 to 6 times more likely to experience eating disorders. That said, try to also focus on non-weight related goals e.g. improved digestion, more energy, restful sleep, less bloating or even feeling stronger.

The female body changes throughout puberty and into adulthood. There is no quick solution or one specific dietary pattern that suits all. However, the evidence tends to advise a regular eating pattern of high fibre carbohydrates, healthy fats and protein along with fruits and vegetables in order to maintain adequate nutritional intake, provide your body with enough energy and help keep cravings at bay.

See below for more diet and lifestyle tips on managing weight and overall health better.

Protein

Your body uses protein to make muscle. Protein foods also provide some important vitamins and minerals, like iron. Protein is also the most satiating macronutrient which means that by increasing your protein intake at meal times and having a protein containing snack, should keep you fuller for longer and reduce cravings, whilst nourishing your body.

Ensure to include a wide variety of protein foods in your diet, aiming for leaner options if possible, like eggs, skinless chicken, turkey, fish (recommended twice weekly, one being oily such as salmon or mackerel), leaner cuts of red meat, and also vegetable sources of protein like beans, pulses, lentils, chickpeas, nuts. See some tips below to include more healthy proteins.

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)

A guide to enhanced self-management

- Cut visible fat off of meats / choose lower % fat meats
- Choose low fat dairy (milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, kefir)
- Add lentils, beans, chickpeas (high in fibre)
- Add tofu/tempeh/Quorn to stir fries and stews
- Add tinned fish to lunches
- Swap to wholegrain versions of bread/pasta/rice – this can add extra protein to your meal
- Add eggs to breakfast options

If you do not eat fish you may miss out on omega 3 fats, which supports heart health. Plant-based sources of omega 3 include flaxseeds, chia seeds, rapeseed oil and walnuts, which need to be eaten daily for adequate amounts. Some people may choose a microalgae omega 3 supplement.

Gut Health and Fibre

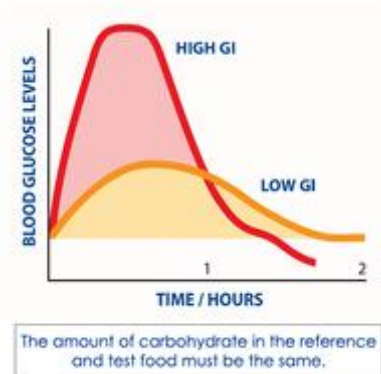
Focus on gut health and increasing the variety of plant based foods and fibre in your diet – this helps beneficial gut bacteria, improves digestion and helps regulate hunger. It is recommended to aim for 30g / day of fibre, which can be found in fruits/vegetables (rich in antioxidants), wholegrain carbohydrates, beans, lentils, nuts and seeds. Antioxidants are vitamins and minerals which protect your body cells from harmful pollutants called free radicals. See below for some tips to increase your plant diversity.

- Switch to wholemeal/wholegrain varieties e.g. bread, pasta, rice, cereal.
- Try a new grain e.g. bulgur wheat, buckwheat, millet, barley, frekkeh – these can be bought ready cooked.
- Eat the rainbow and try some new fruit and vegetables (fresh, frozen, canned can be used). You can aim for ½ plate of vegetables if you are experiencing weight gain.
- Try a new fermented food: Kefir (dairy), miso (soya), sauerkraut, kimchi, kombucha (drink).
- Add lentils/beans/chickpeas to sauces/soups/stews (you can blend them into sauces).
- Try using nut/seed/dried fruit varieties as cereal/yogurt/soup/meal toppers or snacks
- Ensure the increase in fibre to meet recommendations is gradual, as having too much without letting your body adjust may lead to bloating and unwanted changes in bowel habits.

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrate (glucose) is the bodies main source of fuel and an important macronutrient to include throughout the day. Despite women being historically targeted with fad diet claims and advice, your body needs some carbohydrates to function properly, maintain energy levels and provide nutrients. Carbohydrates can be a good source of fibre, opting for wholewheat, wholegrain and granary where possible is advised, and limited refined sugars.

Glycaemic index (GI) is a measure of how quickly the carbohydrate is digested and the impact it has on blood sugar level.



Given the increased risk of insulin resistance and diabetes in people with PCOS, including more foods which are considered lower GI (usually higher fibre carbohydrates) can reduce blood sugar

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)

A guide to enhanced self-management

levels, increase satiety and improve health. Consuming higher fibre carbohydrates as part of a balanced meal, alongside healthy fats and protein can also reduce the glycaemic load, meaning a lower impact on blood sugar levels.

Healthy Fats

Adding healthy fats to your meals can help regulate your appetite and produce a feeling of fullness, portion sizes matter as even healthy fats are high in energy if you are experiencing weight gain. See tips below for mindful use of healthy fats.

- Add a small amount of olive oil to dressings (1-2 x tsps)
- Add ½ avocado to breakfast eggs and wholemeal toast
- Add a tsp of linseed or chia seeds to porridge/cereal
- Add a few nuts to salads, soups, stews, cereal
- Aim for a portion of oily fish a week e.g. salmon, mackerel, sardines (tinned/fresh)



Eating for a healthy heart

We know PCOS can lead to increased risk of metabolic syndrome (obesity, type 2 diabetes and high cholesterol). All the above diet and lifestyle suggestions contribute to a healthy heart but in addition to advice discussed already, see below for extra tips.

You can see the British Heart Foundation website (at the end of leaflet) for more information on a healthy heart.

- Swapping saturated fats (less healthy fats) found in fatty meats, butter, cheese, cakes and biscuits for unsaturated fats (healthier fats) e.g. olive oil, rapeseed oil, avocados, nuts and seeds has been shown to produce positive changes to blood cholesterol levels.
- Other polyunsaturated fats (healthier fats) for example, omega 3 found in oily fish, flaxseed, chia seeds and walnuts, and omega 6, found in sunflower oil, nuts and seeds. A portion of oily fish is ~140g.
- Aim to eat no more than 6g/day salt to help reduce risk of high blood pressure. A lot of salt consumed tends to be from processed foods eaten, such as ready meals, soups and processed meats. Try to cook from scratch where possible, and season food with herbs and spices rather than salt.
- Including more fibre in the diet, a type of fibre known as beta-glucan, found in oats, can reduce cholesterol levels.
- Aim for at least 5 portions of fruits and vegetables a day for good amount of antioxidants

Hydration

Ensuring adequate hydration can help with immunity, digestion, skin health and more. Have more water if you are increasing the amount of fibre in your diet to prevent bloating and constipation. Gut changes throughout the course of your menstrual cycle are common, with constipation affecting some women before ovulation. See some tips below for healthy hydration.

- Choose water as your main source of hydration
- Add lemon/orange/mint/cucumber for flavour if you are not in a habit of drinking water
- Carry a refillable water bottle

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)

A guide to enhanced self-management

- Set reminders on the phone if you are forgetting to drink enough
- Choose herbal teas in colder weather (chamomile, peppermint, cinnamon)

Additional Nutrients to consider:

Calcium and Vitamin D:

The lower level of oestrogen in the blood in PCOS may make you more prone to losing calcium from your bones. You may have cut down on dairy products while trying to lose weight. However, to ensure you get adequate calcium in your diet, we recommend you have three portions of dairy products or calcium fortified dairy-free alternatives per day. The bones in oily fish are also high in calcium.

See below for some foods rich in calcium, you can also see further information on the British Dietetic Association page on calcium or you can also use the Osteoporosis Society calcium calculator to estimate the amount in your current diet in the links at the end of the leaflet.

- Dairy foods such as milk, cheese and yogurt (choose lower fat varieties if you are experiencing weight gain)
- Including tinned fish with bones, such as sardines
- Foods containing white flour and dark green leafy vegetables (excluding spinach)
- If using plant-based dairy alternatives, always choose calcium-fortified varieties



Vitamin D helps the absorption of calcium from foods. Most of our vitamin D is made by the action of sunlight on the skin. Between April and September, going outside for 15 minutes, two or three times a week between 11am and 3pm without sunscreen should be enough to produce sufficient vitamin D. However, all adults and children over the age of one should consider taking a daily supplement containing 10µg vitamin D, especially during autumn and winter.

Other sources of vitamin D include oily fish, red meat, liver, egg yolks and fortified fat spreads and breakfast cereals but this may not be sufficient to meet your needs.

Iron:

Heavy menstrual losses, which may also occur in PCOS, can lead to a low iron level in the blood. Try to include some lean red meat, fortified wholegrain breakfast cereals and dark green vegetables such as broccoli on a regular basis. Vitamin C aids the absorption of iron, so for example, eating some citrus fruit with a meal would be useful.

Omega 3:

Although the evidence is currently limited, there is some suggestion that a regular intake of Omega 3 fatty acids may have a beneficial effect on some of the symptoms / complications of PCOS along with glucose and insulin levels. Aim to include some dietary sources of Omega 3 as part of a healthy diet, such as:

- Oily fish e.g. salmon, mackerel, sardines
- Nuts and seeds
- Vegetable oils e.g. rapeseed and linseed
- Soya and soya products e.g. soybeans, soya milk and tofu
- Green leafy vegetables

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)

A guide to enhanced self-management

Managing bloating and digestive issues

You might be experiencing bloating, change in bowel frequency, constipation or diarrhoea. Contact your health care provider e.g. GP if this is of concern to you, to rule out any other causes for these change in symptoms, they may advise on more tests if appropriate. You can refer to some tips below once other causes have been ruled out.

- Regular meals (spacing your meals regularly across the day)
- Schedule a healthier snacks if getting hungry between meals (fruit, small amounts of nuts, low fat yogurt, oatcake and peanut butter, apple and peanut butter)
- Adequate water intake (aiming for 6-8 cups a day)
- Avoid eating late at night, try to leave a minimum of 2hrs between your last meal and bedtime if possible
- Stick to your routine similarly if you are doing shift work
- Take your time over meals, avoid using screens during meal times or eating on the go
- Take time to chew your foods well before swallowing, you can try putting down your fork between each mouthful
- Aim to limit caffeine and alcohol intake
- Aim for regular physical activity
- Avoid elimination diets, removal of food groups from your diet without the support of a qualified healthcare professional could make symptoms worse and increase your risk of nutritional deficiencies if not monitored carefully.

Managing skin and hair changes

Hair and skin changes are common in PCOS due to a variety of factors including hormonal imbalance, fluctuation of hormone activity over the course of the menstrual cycle and weight changes. You may experience hair head thinning, male pattern hair growth (hirsutism) oilier skin or acne. Do contact your healthcare provider e.g. your GP to discuss these symptoms if they are of concern as there are various treatment options available.

Although not always manageable through diet and lifestyle alone, here are some useful tips which may help:

- Adequate protein intake (see above)
- Adequate hydration
- Optimising body weight (BMI 20-25kg/m²) if you are over or underweight
- Avoiding restrictive diets and rapid weight loss as this can limit vitamins and minerals essential for skin and hair health
- A regular eating pattern throughout the day
- Including healthy fats for essential fatty acids and vitamin E (e.g. oily fish, nuts, seeds)
- Minimum 5 x portions of fruit and vegetables a day

Improving sleep

You may be struggling to fall or stay asleep or perhaps not having a restful sleep, this could be due to hot flushes, anxiety or other causes. It is recognised that inadequate sleep could impact our appetite, general energy levels and stress. See below some sleep hygiene tips to optimise sleep.



- Aim to get to bed at similar times initially, followed by getting up at similar times
- Avoid screen time before bed

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)

A guide to enhanced self-management

- Limit alcohol and caffeine
- Avoid eating large meals too close to bedtime
- Try using a guided meditation before bed
- Try journaling if you wake up at night
- Schedule “worry time” across the day e.g. with journaling/meditation/talking, to minimise thinking about it before bed
- Ensure the room you are sleeping in is well ventilated
- Regular physical activity
- Opening blinds/curtains in the morning, going for a morning walk to observe sunshine
- Seeking further support for mental health e.g. GP, self-referral to talking therapies, support at work

Exercise / Physical Activity

Physical activity can be defined as any movement of the body; you do not have to buy a gym membership or pay for expensive classes. For some, reducing inactivity can be a good start e.g. reducing screen time, regular breaks at work, gardening, walking to/from work, walking to the shops, going to the park at weekends. You can download a step counting app on your phone and work towards increasing from your current level. See more links to exercise resources at the end of this leaflet.

Every local area offers various exercise referral schemes. Check with your local authority to see where patients can be referred to for free support.



The UK Chief Medical Officer's Guideline recommend each week adults do:

- At least **150 minutes moderate** (*raised heart rate, slightly breathless*) intensity activity, **75 minutes of vigorous** (*breathless, unable to have a conversation*) activity, or a mixture of both.
- **Strengthening/Resistance** activities on two days
- Reducing extended periods of sitting

If you are not very confident in achieving this from the start, that is ok. Meet yourself where you are, for example, you could start with 10 minutes of moderate activity like brisk walking a day and increase this as you feel fitter and stronger.



Visceral fat, a type of fat stored in the abdomen, is a typical PCOS symptom and associated with risk of metabolic syndrome, diabetes, and hypertension. There is growing evidence around resistance/strength training in PCOS due to its clinical improvement in muscle mass, improved insulin sensitivity and improvement of cardiovascular (heart). Resistance training can involve using body weight or working against a resistance, ideally these activities should involve all major muscle groups. You can use resistance bands, weights (dumbbells, barbells, sandbags, kettlebells), or using your own weight (push-ups, squats, sit-to-stand, glute bridges). Some may choose to use weight machines, devices that have adjustable seats with handles attached either to weights or hydraulics.

Remember regular strength exercises is also essential in supporting the body to build and retain muscle. Simply eating more protein will not result in muscle gain.

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)

A guide to enhanced self-management

Alternative Approaches

Some women with PCOS can experience low mood and anxiety. Below are strategies which can help with emotional wellbeing.

Mindful meditation – Mindfulness meditation is a type of meditation that involves completely focusing on experiences on a moment-to-moment basis which can reduce bothersome of hot flashes, improvements in anxiety, perceived stress, sleep quality and quality of life.

Yoga – various styles of yoga typically combine physical postures and movement, breathing techniques, and meditation and relaxation. A 2018 evaluation of 13 studies of yoga for menopause symptoms found that yoga reduced physical symptoms, such as hot flashes, as well as psychological symptoms, such as anxiety and depression. Depending on your health conditions you may need to modify or avoid some yoga poses.



Habit Trackers and Progress Charts – having a paper or electronic tracker which outlines your daily or weekly goals can allow you to plan, prepare and monitor progress. Having a visual chart can provide positive reinforcement and help you stay motivated and on track.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, you may choose to focus on 1-2 changes at a time, depending on what applies to you and what you think is realistic. You can utilise the resources and links on the next page to add to your knowledge and seek further support.

We hope the information can help promote long lasting change towards better health for you, that does not overwhelm and does not feel restrictive. Consult with a qualified healthcare professional if you have further queries or concerns on any information discussed here.

This resource is not designed to provide medical guidance, for any medical concerns please consult your GP.

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)

A guide to enhanced self-management

References:

The Lancet 2019 [Health in the UK - The Lancet](#)

British Dietetic Association 2025 bda.uk.com/resourceLibrary/printPdf/?resource=glycaemic-index

Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists 2022 [Polycystic ovary syndrome \(PCOS\): what it means for your long-term health | RCOG](#)

Supporting Information:

The UK PCOS Charity supports women whose lives are affected by PCOS: www.verity-pcos.org.uk

Article on dietary options in PCOS and their role in preventing Type 2 Diabetes
<https://www.nursinginpractice.com/clinical/diabetes/dietary-options-in-pcos-and-their-role-in-preventing-type-2-diabetes>

Low Carb Meal Plan (pdf) www.diabetes.org.uk/guide-to-diabetes/enjoy-food/eating-with-diabetes/meal-plans/low-carb

NHS Patient Resource on PCOS: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/polycystic-ovary-syndrome-pcos/treatment/>

British Dietetic Association 2025 bda.uk.com/resourceLibrary/printPdf/?resource=glycaemic-index

Active Westminster Card Access - [ActiveWestminster Discount Card - ActiveWestminster](#)

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