

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)

What is PCOS?

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is a hormone imbalance in women. It affects about one in 10 women and usually affects women any time from puberty until around menopause.

What causes PCOS?

Women with PCOS have two types of hormones, insulin and androgens, that can be made in higher levels than in women without PCOS.

Family genes contribute to PCOS. Women with PCOS are 50 per cent more likely to have a mother, aunt or sister with PCOS, and the condition is more common in women of Asian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and African backgrounds.

Lifestyle factors can also worsen the symptoms of PCOS. For example, diet and being overweight.

Symptoms of PCOS

Symptoms of PCOS can include:

- irregular periods or no periods
- scalp hair thinning or loss
- excess hair growth on your face or body
- pimples
- weight gain
- emotional problems, such as anxiety and depression
- difficulties getting pregnant
- higher risk of type 2 diabetes.

Each person can have different symptoms, and symptoms can change over time.

How do you know if you have PCOS?

Your doctor will check your body, medical history, blood test results and maybe also ultrasound results to see if you have PCOS.

You are likely to have PCOS if you have two of the following three problems:

1. irregular periods or no periods
2. symptoms like excess facial or body hair and pimples, OR high levels of male type hormones
3. an ultrasound showing too many cysts that look like 'bubbles' in your ovaries. Having some cysts is OK, but your doctor can tell you what is 'too many' for you and your age.

Ultrasound is only done if **1** and **2** are not present, but is not usually recommended for women aged under 20.



Living with PCOS

PCOS cannot be cured, but your doctor can give you advice on how to manage your symptoms.

For example:

- If you are overweight for your height, even a 5-10% loss of weight can improve hormone levels and can lead to less symptoms. For example, if you weigh 80kg, losing 4-8kg can help
- Irregular periods can be managed with hormones, the Pill and other medications
- Excess hair can be managed with waxing, laser hair removal, other hair removal strategies, the Pill and other medications
- Acne can be managed with the Pill and other medications
- Fertility can be managed with a healthy lifestyle, medications or weight-loss surgery
- Emotional problems can be managed with a healthy lifestyle, counselling or medications.

More about fertility

Women with PCOS have the same number of children as women without PCOS, but they might need more help to get pregnant. After the age of 35, you become less fertile and it may be harder to get pregnant. It is good to remember this if you want to have children. This gives you time to work with health professionals if you need help to become pregnant.

For more information go to jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/pcos

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner.

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Jean Hailes for Women's Health takes a broad and inclusive approach to the topic of women's health. This fact sheet generally uses the terms 'women and girls'. These terms are intended to include women with diverse sexualities, intersex women, and women with a transgender experience.

Jean Hailes
FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH

1800 JEAN HAILES (532 642)
jeanhailes.org.au