

# About Polycystic Ovary Syndrome



**Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) is a common condition that affects hormones in about one in seven women during their reproductive years.**

PCOS can cause symptoms like:

- Irregular periods (menstruation)
- Changes to skin and hair
- Difficulty getting pregnant for some women

PCOS occurs due to a hormonal imbalance. Hormones are chemical messengers in the body that help different parts work together. Two hormones linked to PCOS are insulin and androgens. These hormones can make it harder for the ovaries and eggs to work properly.

If the hormone levels can be controlled, the ovaries often start working normally again.

## What causes PCOS?

The exact cause of PCOS is not fully understood, but several factors may play a role:

### Genetics

PCOS is linked to genes. Women with PCOS are 50% more likely to have a mother, sister, or aunt with the condition. PCOS is also more common in women from certain ethnic backgrounds, such as:

- Asian
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- African (e.g., Somali, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Sudanese)
- Caucasian European

### Hormones

PCOS symptoms happen because of an imbalance in two hormones: insulin and androgens. Living with overweight or obesity further impacts this imbalance and can increase symptoms.

## Health Behaviours

What you eat and how active you are can affect PCOS symptoms. Eating healthy foods and staying active can help make symptoms less severe and can help to stabilize weight, or support weight loss.

## What are the symptoms of PCOS?

PCOS is called a "syndrome" because it includes a range of symptoms. These symptoms can vary between women and at different stages of life. Not every woman with PCOS will have all the symptoms, and treatments are available to help manage them.

Common symptoms include:

- Irregular periods (more or less often than monthly)
- No periods or fewer than eight periods a year
- Heavy or light menstrual bleeding
- Excess hair growth on the face, stomach, or back
- Hair thinning or hair loss on the scalp
- Severe acne
- Weight gain or difficulty losing weight
- Difficulty getting pregnant

Associated health impacts and longer-term risks:

- Health challenges during pregnancy
- Emotional challenges such as depression or anxiety
- Increased risk of diabetes
- Sexual health challenges
- Low self-esteem or poor body image
- Reduced overall quality of life

## How is PCOS diagnosed?

Doctors use three main criteria to diagnose PCOS. If a woman has two out of three, she may be diagnosed with PCOS:

- Irregular periods (more or less often than monthly)
- Higher levels of androgen hormones, shown by a blood test or symptoms like acne or excess body hair
- 20 or more follicles (small fluid-filled sacs) on the ovaries, seen on an ultrasound

To confirm the diagnosis, a doctor may order:

### Blood Tests

These check hormone levels, like androgens (male-type hormones such as testosterone), and rule out other conditions.

### Ultrasound

An ultrasound shows a picture of the ovaries. If there are 20 or more follicles on either ovary, this supports a PCOS diagnosis.

### What does "polycystic" mean?

The name "Polycystic Ovary Syndrome" suggests there are many "cysts" on the ovaries, but this is not correct. The dark circles seen on an ultrasound are follicles, which are underdeveloped eggs. These follicles stop growing partway through their development and are not released during ovulation. This causes irregular periods and can make it harder to get pregnant. These follicles do not cause pain and are not the same as larger ovarian cysts, which may need surgery.

## Special notes about ultrasounds

- Ultrasounds are not recommended for women under 20 or for girls within eight years of starting their periods. This is because young girls often have many follicles, which can make results unreliable.
- Ultrasounds are also not used for young women who are not sexually active.

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