

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome - PCOS

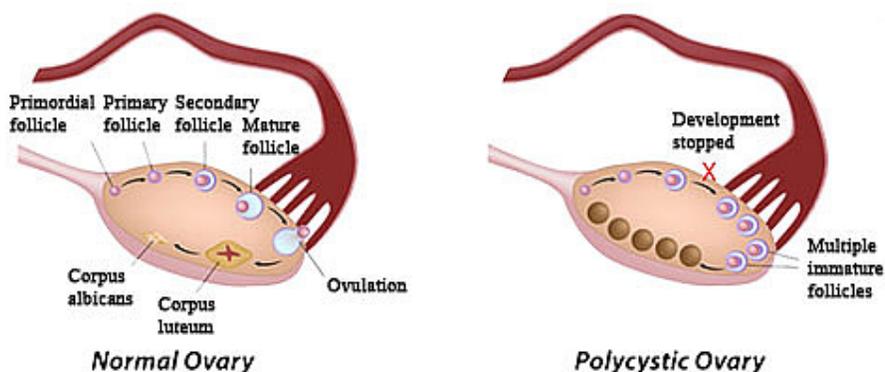


Photo: courtesy of the Center of Reproductive Medicine, Texas

Between 5-10% of women of childbearing age are affected by PCOS, with less than 50% of women diagnosed.

What is it?

PCOS is a common endocrine disorder among women of reproductive age. It occurs when a women's hormones are not in balance. Normally, the ovaries produce estrogen, progesterone and a small amount of male sex hormones (androgens). For women with PCOS, the levels of androgens are higher than normal. This may cause multiple small cysts to grow in the ovary which makes it difficult for her to ovulate regularly each month.

This can make it more difficult for her to become pregnant and is the most common cause of infertility. The higher androgen levels also tend to cause acne, excess hair growth, and irregular menstrual periods.

Cause of PCOS

The exact cause of PCOS is unknown but is thought to involve a combination of genetic and environmental factors. You are more at risk if you have a mother or sister with the condition. Insulin is also linked to PCOS. Insulin is a hormone that controls how sugars and starches are changed into energy for the body. Higher levels of insulin can increase the amount of androgens in the body.

What are the symptoms?

You may have one or more of these signs:

- Infertility or not able to become pregnant
- Infrequent, absent, and/or irregular menstrual periods
- Hirsutism - more hair growth on the face, chest, stomach, back, thumbs, or toes
- Acne or oily skin
- Overweight or weight gain, especially around the waist
- Thick, dark patches of skin appear on the neck, armpits, skin folds, & on the inside of the upper leg
- Cysts on the ovaries

How is it diagnosed?

Initially, the healthcare provider will review your medical history and current symptoms. You may also have one or more of the following exams or tests:

- Physical exam and a pelvic exam
- Blood tests to check hormone and insulin levels
- Pelvic ultrasound, to check the ovaries and endometrium or the lining of the uterus

How is it treated?

Treatment is focused on the individual needs of the woman and may include:

- Changes to exercise and eating to manage weight
- Birth control to manage menstrual cycles, lower androgen levels and clear acne
- Medicines to manage insulin levels, fertility or other signs of PCOS
- Surgery if medicines are not effective