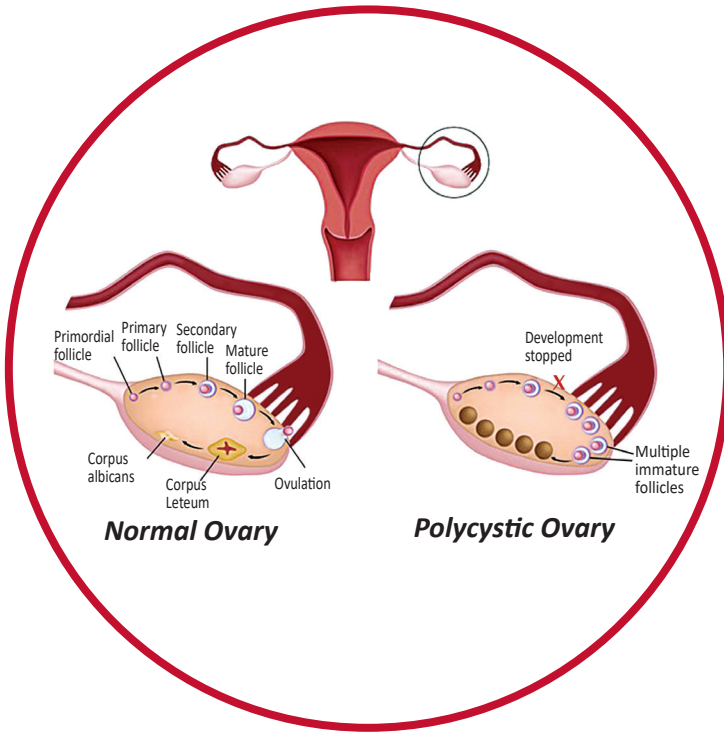


POLYCYSTIC OVARIAN SYNDROME



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Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) is a condition that causes irregular menstrual periods and elevated levels of male hormones (androgens) in women.

What are polycystic ovaries?

Polycystic ovaries are slightly larger than normal ovaries containing 10-12 follicles (small cysts) within them. Polycystic ovaries are very common, affecting 20% of women.

Having polycystic ovaries does not mean one has polycystic ovarian syndrome. Around 6-7% of women with polycystic ovaries have PCOS. The syndrome is diagnosed when any two of the following three criteria are met :

- Irregular periods
- Features of excess male hormones, such as facial hair and acne
- Polycystic ovaries on scan

What causes PCOS?

The cause of PCOS is not yet known. PCOS sometimes runs in families.

What are the symptoms of PCOS?

The symptoms of PCOS are related to abnormal male hormone levels and higher insulin levels (due to insulin resistance).

Signs and symptoms of PCOS usually begin around the time of puberty, although some women do not develop symptoms until adulthood. Because hormonal changes vary from one woman to another, severity likewise varies.

The symptoms of PCOS can include

- Irregular periods or no periods at all (fewer than six to eight menstrual periods per year)
- Difficulty in achieving pregnancy (due to irregular ovulation)
- Having more facial or body hair than usual (hirsutism)
- Loss of scalp hair
- Being overweight, rapid increase in weight, difficulty in losing weight

- Oily skin, acne, pigmentation
- Depression and mood swings

Although PCOS is not completely reversible, there are a number of treatments that can reduce or minimize the bothersome symptoms. Most women with PCOS are able to lead a normal life without significant complications.

How is PCOS diagnosed?

Women with PCOS often have the above signs and symptoms. The following investigations are performed to arrive at the diagnosis :

- Blood tests for hormone levels
- Ultrasound for polycystic ovaries

What are the long-term health risks?

There is greater risk of developing long-term health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure and cholesterol, heart disease, depression, mood swings, sleep problems and early cancer of the uterine lining (endometrium).

Treatment

Treatment revolves around the following:

- Weight loss (if overweight)
- Lifestyle changes
- Treating individual symptoms

PCOS is a lifelong condition, but it can be treated in a number of ways. Treatment depends on the main symptoms and whether a woman wishes to become pregnant.

Lifestyle changes:

Weight loss is the main way to reduce the overall risk of long-term health problems.

This can be achieved by:

- Healthy balanced diet

- Exercise daily for at least 30 minutes which improves the body's use of insulin and can help relieve symptoms of PCOS

Medication:

- Progesterone pills or birth control pills may be prescribed to regularize periods
- Women who wish to become pregnant may be given medications to help them ovulate
- Some women with PCOS will be prescribed medication to lower their insulin levels (metformin)
- Birth control pills and other medications (anti androgens) may also be advised to help slow the growth of new body hair. It may take a number of months to notice any results
- Unwanted hair can be removed by shaving, electrolysis, laser or other hair removal methods
- If needed, other medications may be used to treat diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels

Surgery:

Laparoscopic surgery (ovarian drilling) may be advised for some subfertile women in whom medical treatment (ovulation induction) is unsuccessful.

Is there a cure?

There is no permanent cure for PCOS. Medical treatments aim to manage and reduce the symptoms or consequences of having PCOS. Many women with PCOS successfully manage their symptoms and long-term health risks without medical intervention by maintaining a healthy lifestyle.