

# THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE POLYCYSTIC OVARY SYNDROME

In the Clinic  
Annals of Internal Medicine

## What is the polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)?

- PCOS is a common hormonal disorder affecting 5% to 10% of women.
- Many women don't find out that they have PCOS until they have difficulty getting pregnant.
- Women with PCOS have high levels of hormones called androgens, which can destabilize normal ovulation.
- Having irregular, infrequent menstrual cycles is a common symptom of PCOS.
- PCOS may cause small cysts to form in the ovary. These cysts are detected by ultrasonography, an imaging test that shows the internal organs.

## Who gets PCOS?

- PCOS can occur in women once they go through puberty.
- Symptoms often develop during the first year that girls start menstruating.
- Doctors don't know what causes PCOS. It seems to run in families, but other factors seem to play a role, too, such as body weight.
- PCOS is more common in overweight women.

## What are the symptoms of PCOS?

- Irregular periods or no periods at all.
- Infertility.
- Excess hair growth on face, chest, and back.
- Severe acne, acne that develops in adulthood, or acne that does not get better when it is treated.
- In severe cases, male-pattern hair loss.
- Raised, velvety brown discoloration on the nape of neck, underarms, knuckles, and elbows.

## How is it treated?

- Losing even a small amount of weight can reduce symptoms and help your body ovulate more normally.



- An oral contraception agent ("the pill") can treat physical symptoms, such as excess hair growth and make periods more regular. It can be combined with a drug called an "antiandrogen," which prevents or blocks the effects of too much androgen.
- Drugs that trigger ovulation, such as clomiphene, can improve fertility and help you become pregnant.

## Can you get pregnant if you have PCOS?

- Most women who have PCOS are able to become pregnant.
- Your doctor may prescribe a drug called clomiphene that helps your ovaries to produce eggs.
- Lifestyle modifications, including weight loss, smoking cessation, and exercise, can improve fertility and increase the chances of pregnancy.
- Talk to your doctor if you have PCOS and wish to become pregnant. You may benefit from seeing a fertility specialist.

## For More Information

[www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/upload/PCOS\\_booklet.pdf](http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/upload/PCOS_booklet.pdf)  
Comprehensive booklet titled "Beyond Infertility: Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome" on understanding PCOS, particularly PCOS-caused infertility, from the NIH's National Institute for Child Health and Human Development.

[www.hormone.org/polycystic/](http://www.hormone.org/polycystic/)  
Provides information for patients on PCOS symptoms and treatment, plus a list of PCOS links, from the Hormone Foundation, the public education affiliate of The Endocrine Society.

# ACP

AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS  
INTERNAL MEDICINE | Doctors for Adults®