

PCOS: The Silent Syndrome

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Key points:

- An introduction to PCOS
- How it presents itself and its diagnosis
- Treatments for PCOS
- Why it's important to spread awareness for it

An introduction to PCOS

Polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), is a common hormonal disorder affecting up to 11-13% of women globally. Despite its prevalence it remains severely underdiagnosed and understudied. Diagnosis is based on the presence of at least two out of three key symptoms. On average it takes several years and multiple health-care visits for women to receive correct diagnosis and appropriate treatment.¹

Symptoms and Diagnosis

PCOS manifests through a variety of symptoms; physical changes, hormonal imbalances, and even by disrupting the mental health of women of reproductive age. Factors such as lifestyle choices, genetic predisposition, and environment have been linked to the development of this disorder.² The diagnosis criterion includes:

- Ovulatory dysfunction
- Hyperandrogenism
- Polycystic ovary morphology

Whereas some of its other common symptoms outside of the criterion include:

- Infertility
- Heightened risks of pregnancy complications
- Insulin resistance

- Cardiovascular diseases
- hypertension
- Eating disorders
- Anxiety disorders
- Psychosexual dysfunction
- Body image issues
- Weight gain
- Hirsutism
- Male-pattern baldness¹⁴⁵

PCOS is also correlated with conditions such as obesity, metabolic syndrome, and even type II diabetes.³

As mentioned above, PCOS presents itself in various symptoms. While there is no definitive cure for PCOS, there are ways the symptoms can become more tolerable and improve the quality of life for a patient. The first line of treatment typically focuses on lifestyle changes. This means improving dietary choices, sleep quality, setting fitness goals, and stress management. Supplements and pharmaceuticals serve as supportive measurements rather than primary solutions. Not only does evaluating a patient's choices help in figuring out the contributions that worsen their symptoms, but also potentially plays a crucial role in slowing down the progression of their PCOS.⁴ When these changes yield little to no improvement, clinical interventions may be necessary. The most common of which would be

treating PCOS patients with a combination of combined oral contraceptive pills (COCP) and metformin. Metformin is a drug that is insulin-sensitizing, this is typically prescribed to women with insulin resistance, helping to reduce hyperandrogenism. Meanwhile, COCPs help in regulating menstrual cycles and managing hirsutism.⁵ However, long-term use of contraceptives is associated with increased risk of endometrial cancer in postmenopausal women, a risk that potentially increases with prolonged use. In turn, new research is being conducted into medicinal plants for a more holistic treatment for PCOS. Herbal extracts, such as natural polyphenols, have been used to treat hormonal imbalances in France for decades. These have shown fewer adverse side effects in comparison to the more conventional treatments.

Why do we need to spread awareness?

Although information on PCOS has become largely accessible today in comparison to the previous decades, a substantial portion of it spreads misinformation and contradictions. These inaccuracies may prevent women from fully understanding their condition, making it difficult to make essential adjustments.⁷ Not only that, but also PCOS diagnosis is greatly prolonged, even by healthcare professionals. This is largely due to limited understanding of the causes of this hormonal disorder, which emphasizes the need for more research its pathophysiology. Early diagnosis results in a timely intervention, and so a personalized medical plan can be made. This reduces the risk of associated complications before they develop.¹

References

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