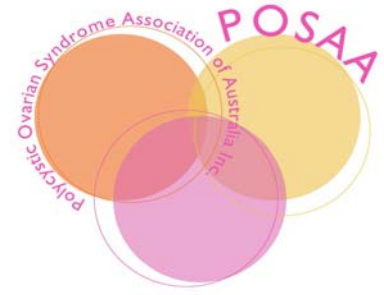


MEDIA INFORMATION KIT:

POLYCYSTIC OVARIAN (OVARY) SYNDROME (PCOS)

POLYCYSTIC OVARIAN SYNDROME ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA INC (POSAA)



WHAT IS POLYCYSTIC OVARIAN SYNDROME ?

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) is a major women's health issue that is not widely recognised in Australia. It's often misdiagnosed or overlooked due to its complex nature. It is under-publicised because often sufferers feel too embarrassed to talk about their symptoms.

It's estimated half a million women potentially have the condition in Australia. Most of them don't know it, that's why we say this syndrome is a hidden epidemic. It is also one of the leading causes of female infertility.

Put very simply, PCOS is a serious health condition resulting from a hormonal imbalance and insulin resistance. It affects one in eight Australian women.¹ For the majority of women, the main abnormality is insulin resistance - where the pancreas produces much more insulin than normal to overcome the body's insulin resistance. This in turn triggers a cascading effect in the body, where it produces an excess amount of androgen and inefficient oestrogen that results in follicles building up on the ovary without ovulation. Put simply, these are eggs that aren't released from the ovary... and become tiny cysts. This causes visible side effects such as obesity, excess hair growth, in some cases alopecia [loss of hair from the scalp] and acne.

But there are also very serious health complications – public health officials consider PCOS “a serious and dangerous syndrome, affecting the lives of a large number of women”.² A large proportion of PCOS women will experience sub-fertility, infertility, insulin resistance and potentially heart disease and diabetes.

International studies show that one in ten women have the disorder. However recent research conducted in Melbourne found the figure in Australia could be one in eight women. Unfortunately most sufferers are unaware they have the condition as their symptoms are passed off as merely delayed puberty or other illnesses.

Why is it called a 'syndrome'? Syndrome means a disease or disorder that produces a different collection of symptoms and physical signs. No two PCOS patients share exactly the same symptoms.

Is there a cure?

Currently, there is no cure.

What causes PCOS?

Scientists aren't 100% sure what causes the condition but suspect there is a genetic link, that these women are pre-disposed to getting PCOS. There is also another tantalising clue; researchers continue to discover links between PCOS women and their family history of diabetes or insulin resistance. Roughly half of all PCOS patients do have a family history of diabetes or insulin resistance. Environmental factors may also trigger some cases. Stress, weight gain and extreme weight loss can also trigger PCOS in susceptible women.

Diagnosing PCOS:

All too often the Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome Association of Australia Inc (POSAA) committee is told about doctors not diagnosing the condition for months and in some cases years. Detecting the syndrome is difficult, because there is no simple test; diagnosing PCOS is a little like putting a jigsaw puzzle together.

¹ Kovacs, Professor Gab et al. “The incidence of polycystic ovaries and polycystic ovary syndrome amongst women in Melbourne Australia”. The Australian & NZ Journal of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, February 2005.

² Public Health Association of Australia, Policy Paper - October 9, 2004.

Women or teenage girls who suffer two or more of the following symptoms should make an appointment with a doctor – to see if they have PCOS.

The symptoms are:

- Delayed puberty
- Excess weight around the waistline
- Acne
- Irregular or no periods
- Excess hair on the face or body
- Accelerated hair loss from the scalp
- Unexplained fatigue
- Infertility

Doctors rely on a combination of ultrasounds, blood tests, hormone tests, diabetes or insulin resistance testing to confirm a diagnosis of PCOS.

Even if a doctor suspects PCOS, diagnosis must be confirmed because of the complications and risks of the syndrome.

Treatments:

Teenagers and women who are diagnosed with PCOS experience many feelings. Those range from relief at finally having a name for their medical problems to anguish, at not knowing what to do. Many women discover their condition after failing to become pregnant or miscarrying a number of times.

While there is no cure for PCOS, women have the power to alleviate symptoms and dramatically improve their lifestyle.

Medication can help control some symptoms. The Pill is prescribed to help some women regain a menstrual cycle – and in some instances control acne. However, some doctors believe prescribing the Pill may be the wrong thing to do – as the Pill may trigger insulin resistance.

Almost half of all PCOS patients have insulin resistance. Insulin-sensitising drugs can help restore a normal metabolic function, helping sufferers lose weight and in some instances, restore fertility. Drugs can also be prescribed to treat excess hair growth. And there are a myriad of other medicinal based treatments to boost patients' fertility or restore their fertility.

But science continues to show the most important place to start is with permanent lifestyle changes.

Even small changes can have an effect in reversing symptoms and in some cases, restoring or boosting fertility. A daily dietary pattern based on low-fat, low G.I. eating and a regular exercise regime can dramatically improve symptoms and day-to-day life for PCOS women.

American research shows 40% of patients with PCOS can develop type-2 diabetes by the time they are 44 years old. This research can't be applied in the Australian context – as the study involved extremely obese women. Australian studies are currently underway to assess the complication risk factors here.

PCOS patients have a seven-fold increase in risk factors for developing cardiovascular disease than normal women. But, adopting lifestyle changes means these women can significantly reduce their chances of these serious complications.

Weight loss for PCOS women, this is much easier said than done!

Because of their hormonal imbalance, PCOS women find it very difficult to lose weight. Fat cells, particularly around the tummy are very sensitive to insulin. As PCOS women have an excess of insulin, it is difficult to burn off the excess fat.³

But weight loss is possible. Studies show women who follow a low-fat, low Glycemic Index diet can and do lose weight. Women have to be realistic about the weight they can lose on a week-to-week basis.

Sufferers can eat their way to better health and boost their fertility.

Weight loss, even as little as five per cent, can improve the severity of symptoms – like excess hair growth and boost their fertility.

A low-fat, low GI eating pattern is more effective with regular exercise. An exercise plan incorporating resistance training, helps to increase the body's muscle mass and in turn, this helps speed up the body's metabolic rate – which sparks weight loss. Doctors advise 45 minutes of exercise, five times a week should aid weight loss.

Diet can also improve other symptoms, some women report reduced and finer hair growth after eating a low GI diet. There are also a number of drugs that can help reduce hair growth – and even laser treatment to permanently reduce hair growth.

There are also other methods to help PCOS women conceive. There are fertility drugs to help a patient ovulate. Also the insulin-sensitising drug Metformin has shown to improve the chances of PCOS patients in having a baby.

Low Self-Esteem and Depression:

While depression is not a symptom of PCOS – certainly, we know PCOS women suffer poor self-esteem, they feel stressed and in many cases depressed about their situation and symptoms.

Meeting other PCOS women in a support group setting with POSAA helps women understand that they are not alone in their struggle. Often, sufferers do feel isolated, as they're unable to talk freely about their embarrassing symptoms like excess weight, excess hair, acne and infertility. POSAA provides a forum for women, their partners and families to come together – and know that we provide a non-judgemental, understanding environment. We can provide tips and advice that sometimes women are just too afraid to ask their doctors.

WHAT IS THE POLYCYSTIC OVARIAN SYNDROME ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA INC. (POSAA)?

An important tool in the fight against PCOS is the patient support and advocacy group the Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome of Association of Australia Inc. (POSAA). POSAA is a registered charity – with no paid members of staff. We rely on the support of our members and volunteers.

POSAA is an association organised by women with PCOS for other women with PCOS, their partners and doctors. It's a support group providing valuable advice and information to members about the syndrome and different ways of treating it. All committee members and all state delegates are volunteers who are passionate about helping others and raising community awareness about the condition. We have ATO sanctioned charity status – enabling donations of \$2 and more to be tax deductible.

The Association publishes a quarterly 12-page newsletter providing members with information on the latest research, nutritional advice and associated PCOS news. We also have a website – which is currently being updated – providing members with information and an online forum to discuss their problems.

Some state groups also run monthly support group meetings offering face-to-face support and advice on PCOS. Often at these meetings we have guest speakers who give important advice and tips on the best ways of managing the syndrome.

³ Brand-Miller, Jennie et al "The New Glucose Revolution –managing PCOS". Hodder Headline Australia, 2004. p.16

Every year the Association also holds an annual conference; inviting leading clinicians to tell our members the latest information and treatment advice for PCOS patients. POSAA is a valuable tool in helping patients take control of their symptoms, improve their lifestyle – and in many instances, boost their fertility!

“Many women and teenagers needlessly suffer in silence because they’re embarrassed about their symptoms,” said POSAA Media Officer Ms Sabra Lane.

“For many PCOS women, it’s an awful stigma to have the syndrome as they’re overweight, have embarrassing excess hair and can’t fall pregnant.

“These women shouldn’t suffer in silence, there are practical things they can do to improve their condition and boost their self-esteem and their fertility,” she said.

“We have a group of women who regularly get together to talk about their situation, it’s important because often they feel they’re battling this condition alone.

“These women are not alone, they have the power to improve their health and lifestyle,” Ms Lane said.

Various state branches hold regular support group meetings for sufferers – their partners and families. Those interested in finding out more information about POSAA can email info@posaa.asn.au or phone 02 8250 0222.

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For more information about PCOS and the POSAA visit www.posaa.asn.au