

POLYCYSTIC OVARY SYNDROME (PCOS) AND EXERCISE

PUBLIC

WHAT IS POLYCYSTIC OVARY SYNDROME (PCOS)?

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is a complex and common hormone condition affecting around 1 in 7 girls and women. Androgens and insulin are the two hormones responsible for the symptoms related to PCOS.

The known causes of PCOS include heredity and some environmental factors. A healthy diet and regular physical activity can improve the symptoms of PCOS.

The signs and symptoms of PCOS vary between women and can occur at different life stages.

Symptoms of PCOS may include:

- Irregular periods (menstruation)
- Excess hair growth on face, stomach or back
- Loss of hair on the top of the scalp
- Acne (pimples) that may be very severe
- Weight gain (especially around the waist)
- Difficulty becoming pregnant
- Emotional challenges (distress, anxiety and depression)
- Sexual health challenges
- Low self-esteem or poor body image
- Impact on quality of life

Longer term health risks include:

- Type 2 diabetes
- Obesity
- Infertility
- Risk factors for heart disease



Not all of these symptoms or health problems are experienced by women with PCOS.

MANAGING PCOS EFFECTIVELY

Evidence shows that lifestyle changes, including regular physical activity and a healthy diet are the most effective ways to reduce the severity of PCOS symptoms.

HOW DOES EXERCISE HELP WITH PCOS?

Exercise has many important benefits for women with PCOS including improved:

- Insulin action, reducing the risk of diabetes
- Weight gain prevention
- Emotional wellbeing
- Energy levels, motivation and self-confidence
- Period regularity
- Fertility
- Fitness, muscle endurance and strength

WHAT TYPE OF EXERCISE IS BEST?

Any exercise or activity that is enjoyable is recommended as this is likely to be more sustainable over time.

To achieve the best results exercise should include:

- Aerobic exercise – which helps improve heart health and metabolism
- Weight/resistance training – which helps to build muscle strength and tone
- Or a combination of both

Women who want to maintain health and an ideal weight should aim for:

- 150 minutes per week of moderate intensity activity, OR 75 minutes per week of vigorous activity, OR a combination
- Include weight training 2 times per week on non-consecutive days

Women who need to improve health and promote weight loss should aim for:

- 300 minutes per week of moderate intensity activity, OR 150 minutes per week of vigorous activity, OR a combination
- Include weight training 2 times per week on non-consecutive days

WHAT IS MODERATE INTENSITY AND VIGOROUS INTENSITY EXERCISE?

Moderate intensity exercise includes activities that cause a noticeable increase in your heart rate but can be performed whilst maintaining a conversation and are otherwise comfortable. Examples include brisk walking, gardening, cycling, swimming or jogging.

Vigorous intensity exercise includes activities that cause a significant increase in your heart rate, generally cannot be undertaken whilst maintaining a conversation and cause sweating. Examples include running, aerobics, hiking, competitive sports and fast swimming or cycling.

BARRIERS TO EXERCISE

Many people experience challenges to commencing exercise such as time restrictions, motivation, fear of injury and/or lack of confidence. Women with PCOS may also experience pain and incontinence.

Identifying and overcoming barriers is essential to maintaining regular exercise. Thinking simply about exercise, planning ahead and choosing activities that are more enjoyable may improve confidence and likelihood to participate. For example, walking is the most popular form of exercise reported by women and is free, easily accessible, widely applicable and socially stimulating. Walking, with progression to jogging/running in intervals may be a good place to start. Many women prefer to exercise with someone, so talking with friends, partner and family is also recommended for added support.



HOW DO I GET STARTED?

- **Start slowly, by trying to achieve 10 consecutive minutes of activity** (i.e. 1000-1500 steps)
- Choose activities you enjoy, to help you stick to your exercise and activity plan
- When confident with your personal exercise plan include vigorous sessions (weight- or aerobic-based activities that have high intensity intermittent activities [i.e. HIIT sessions or team sports])
- Prior to starting more intense exercise, if pain or incontinence are issues, seek advice from a suitably trained Accredited Exercise Physiologist or Physiotherapist for assessment and management of the symptoms

Try to be physically active or exercise on most, if not all, days of the week for 30 to 60 minutes by:

- Using every opportunity to walk whenever possible
- Taking the stairs instead of the elevator
- Parking further away
- Take up a sport or activity that you enjoy (swimming, team sports, hiking)
- Invite friends and family to participate in exercise/activities



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REFERENCES AND FURTHER INFORMATION

Exercise is Medicine Australia
www.exerciseismedicine.org.au

Exercise Right www.exerciseright.com.au

Find a Physiotherapist www.choose.physio

Find an Accredited Exercise Physiologist www.essa.org.au

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