



THE iPad VERSION of this article contains more information about PCOS. Download the FREE App from www.fitnessfirst.com.au/magazine

ARE YOU AT RISK OF POLYCYSTIC OVARY SYNDROME?

Up to one in ten women of childbearing age have PCOS, yet many don't know it. PCOS can cause infertility and increase the risk of developing diabetes and heart disease, but in many cases it can be managed with lifestyle changes.

WHAT IS POLYCYSTIC OVARY SYNDROME?

PCOS is a collection of symptoms, which can vary from woman to woman. These include:

- ✦ Irregular or absent menstrual periods
- ✦ Infertility or reduced fertility
- ✦ Hirsutism (excess hair growth on the face, chest and abdomen)
- ✦ Alopecia (scalp hair loss)
- ✦ Acne
- ✦ Obesity and difficulty losing weight
- ✦ Increased risk of miscarriage.

Many women seek treatment for these symptoms, but go for some time without being diagnosed with PCOS as they don't consider their symptoms to be related, instead seeking treatment for them one at a time.

WHAT CAUSES PCOS?

There is still a lot to be confirmed about the actual causes; however, in the majority of women the underlying problem is high levels of insulin in the bloodstream resulting from a condition called insulin resistance.

Insulin resistance is an insensitivity of the body to insulin, which is also the main cause of type 2 diabetes. Insulin is a hormone, produced in the body by the pancreas, which helps to regulate blood glucose levels. When you have insulin resistance, your insulin does not work effectively, so the body needs to produce increasing amounts of insulin to keep the blood glucose levels under control. These high levels of insulin act on the ovaries to cause increased production of male hormones, which disrupts the normal ovulation cycle,

causing many of the PCOS symptoms.

The good news is that by improving insulin resistance, many of the problems of PCOS are resolved or, at least, improved. And lifestyle changes can go a long way towards improving insulin resistance.

MANAGING PCOS

For women with PCOS, it has been found that treating the insulin resistance can significantly improve all or most of the symptoms associated with PCOS, by reducing male hormone levels and restoring ovulation. Treating insulin resistance will also help to reduce the long-term risks of diabetes and heart disease.

Insulin resistance can be improved with lifestyle modifications including diet, exercise and weight loss. Medication may also be needed but is only effective if used in combination with lifestyle changes. Lifestyle changes with even small amounts of weight loss (around five to ten per cent of body weight) have been shown to:

- ✦ Reduce insulin levels
- ✦ Improve menstrual function
- ✦ Reduce male hormone levels
- ✦ Improve symptoms of hirsutism and acne
- ✦ Restore ovulation
- ✦ Increase fertility in women with PCOS.

The best type of eating plan for women with PCOS is one that is low in saturated fat and high in fibre and which includes carbohydrate foods that have a low glycaemic index. Spreading food intake evenly across the day and avoiding eating large quantities at one

time is also important as this helps to prevent large rises in blood glucose and insulin levels.

Your healthy eating plan should be combined with regular exercise, aiming for at least 30 to 40 minutes of activity on most days. It is best to include a combination of both aerobic exercise (such as walking, running or dancing) and resistance (lifting weights). A number of studies have now shown that lifting weights and doing high intensity interval training can improve insulin sensitivity and assist with weight loss.

TO FIND OUT MORE...

If you have PCOS and need help with your diet, see an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) who specialises in this area. Your APD will be able to develop an eating plan to suit your individual needs. To find an APD in your area visit the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) website www.daa.asn.au. Or for more information about PCOS visit the Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome Association of Australia (www.posaa.asn.au), the Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health (www.jeanhailes.org.au) or www.managingpcos.org.au

DR KATE MARSH, PhD, MNutrDiet, BSc, GradCertDiabEdn&Mgt

Kate is an advanced accredited practising dietitian (AdvAPD) and credentialled diabetes educator (CDE) who specialises in PCOS. She is the founder of the PCOS Health & Nutrition Centre (www.pcoshealth.com.au) and author of *The Low GI Diet for PCOS* (Hachette Australia, 2011).