

Dietary Advice for Women with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)

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The logo for Yeovil Hospital Healthcare, featuring a stylized 'Y' inside a circle with a rainbow-colored border.

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Many women with PCOS have been found to have Insulin resistance, which means their body does not respond as quickly to Insulin. Insulin is a hormone which is produced by the pancreas, a gland in the abdomen. It is secreted when glucose is detected in the bloodstream after eating starchy and sweet foods (carbohydrates). Insulin causes glucose to be taken into the body cells to be used for energy.

In Insulin resistance, the body has to produce more Insulin in order for the cells to take up glucose. These continuously high insulin levels can cause abnormally high levels of other hormones such as testosterone, which causes the symptoms of PCOS to become worse but can also lead to weight gain because the body isn't converting food to energy properly and so demands more food than it normally needs. Unfortunately, this hormone imbalance makes it more difficult to lose weight.

Research has shown that losing just 5-10% of your bodyweight significantly improves the symptoms of PCOS and lessens the risk of developing long-term complications. Losing weight might not be easy but is achievable if you follow the right steps. If you are to lose weight successfully, and keep it off, you need to make some small, permanent changes to your lifestyle.

Dietary Recommendations

- Eat regular meals as this helps keep blood sugar levels stable so that you feel fuller for longer. It is important to reduce the carbohydrate by avoiding sweet and starchy foods. Replace sugary carbohydrates with wholegrain ones such as wholemeal and granary breads, wholewheat pasta, brown rice and porridge/muesli
- Eating protein-rich foods such as fish, lean meat, pulses (such as lentils, baked beans) with carbohydrates can help to minimise rises in insulin levels
- Filling up on five portions of fruit, vegetables and salad a day will help to satisfy your appetite without breaking the calorie bank. (Note: potatoes count as starchy carbohydrate not a vegetable)

- Eat less fat, particularly saturated ones found in meat products, pastries, mayonnaise, take-away meals, fried foods, cakes, biscuits, chocolate, full fat dairy foods (cheese, milk, cream, butter, yoghurt) crisps and nuts
- Eat at least three portions of low-fat dairy foods a day, as these are the most important source of calcium in the diet, essential in the building of healthy bones
- Drink more water if you can. Research has found that drinking two glasses of water, three times a day can increase weightloss. Water fills up the stomach, decreasing one's appetite, with a liquid that has no calories, fat or cholesterol. If you don't like drinking water, then opt for diet drinks and others with artificial sweeteners to help reduce your calorie intake

Physical Activity

According to many studies, exercise has been shown to improve insulin resistance and can support dietary interventions to promote and maintain weightloss.

- It is important that you choose physical activities that you enjoy and that fit into your daily life e.g. walking/cycling to work, going for a walk in your lunch break
- Share activities with a friend or family member, you can help motivate each other
- Try to reduce periods of sedentary activity such as watching TV, sitting at your computer, get up and walk around for a few minutes

Achieving your goals

You are more likely to succeed at losing weight if you are realistic about the amount of weight gradually, aiming for ½ kg (1lb) per week. Weigh yourself not more than once a week to check your progress.

Enlisting the support of friends and family will help to increase your chances of success. Explain to them what sort of support you want from them.

If you need any advice regarding losing weight, ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian.

Further Support

Verity self-help group

Run by women, for women with PCOS. It publishes information booklets and twice yearly newsletters with up-to-date information and research and runs local support group meetings.

 www.verity-pcos.org.uk

Books

PCOS - A woman's guide to dealing with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome by Colette Harris and Dr Adam Carey. Published by Thorsons.

The PCOS diet book by Colette Harris and Theresa Cheung. Published by Thorsons.

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