



Health Fact Sheet

Polycystic Ovaries

Polycystic ovaries (PCOS) is an increasingly common problem for women of child-bearing age, which can affect fertility and has some distressing symptoms – in fact it is fast becoming one of the most common hormonal disorders in women.

SYMPTOMS OF PCOS

Symptoms vary from woman to woman but the most common are:

- infrequent or prolonged periods, or possibly even the absence of periods,
- obesity or weight issues
- excessive hair growth, particularly on the face, caused by androgen excess (excess of male hormones)
- infertility
- cysts on surface of ovaries
- insulin resistance, possibly lead to Type II Diabetes

Research has also shown that women with PCOS also have low-grade inflammation, which in itself can be the precursor for many other chronic diseases.

From a naturopathic point of view we seek to re-balance the underlying hormone imbalances. Once this has been established the symptoms disappear.

WHAT CAUSES PCOS?

Hormonal imbalance is the short answer, but the reasons for the hormone imbalances can be varied. It is thought that genetics may play a part – if your mother had PCOS you are more likely to have the problem, but there are also many environmental and dietary factors which contribute to hormone imbalance – and they are becoming a major problem in the 21st Century.

PCOS and Oestrogen Dominance - Oestrogen dominance and exposure to xeno-oestrogens can play a big part in increasing oestrogen levels beyond that required in the body, and a large part of any PCOS regime is a cleanse to rebalance things. PCOS is a sign that excess toxicity, whether from diet, chemicals or other pollutants, in the body is being dumped into the reproductive system – this is one of the body's safety mechanisms to ensure toxicity is not stored around vital organs.

Top of the list of suspects is hormonal imbalance usually considered to be caused by chemical toxins. Research has shown that women with PCOS have excessive levels of oestrogen leading to an imbalance between progesterone and oestrogen levels, where oestrogen levels are higher than they should be. This not only causes problems of hormonal imbalance but raises the risk of other oestrogen-driven conditions such as soft tissue cancers.

The most common source of this excess oestrogen is from what are called xeno-oestrogens or chemicals which exert an oestrogenic effect within the body, and are very much a byproduct of our modern lifestyles.

Xenoestrogens - Xenoestrogens are a major cause of reproductive issues in both men and women. They lead to hormonal imbalance which can result in a host of problems. They are environmental oestrogens found in a wide variety of things we are exposed to on a daily basis. The most common are:

Commercial meat and dairy products – hormones are given to animals to increase milk yields

Pesticide residues on vegetables, grains etc – many of these are known hormone disruptors

Plastics – plastic water bottles, particularly if they have been exposed to heat (sun) are a common source.

Skincare products – some ranges of skincare and toiletries contain chemicals that are detrimental

Microwave cooking in plastic – again the heat leaches out oestrogen-like chemicals

Tap water – as so much water is recycled, residues of the Pill and HRT are introduced into the water system.

All of these have been linked in women with not just PCOS but also uterine fibroids, endometriosis and other reproductive issues.

Sunscreens, fake tans etc – found in both moisturisers and sun products research is focusing specifically on the benzophenone (BP) type of ingredients, which have been shown to pass through the skin and mimic the effects of oestrogen.

Environmental chemicals – there is a growing body of evidence linking various environmental chemicals to hormonal imbalances. These include a pesticide that has been banned for over 30 years – hexachlorocyclohexane – but still persists in the environment.

Nutritional deficiencies - these can also play a part in hormonal imbalances – often insufficient B vitamins, zinc, magnesium, vitamin C & E and essential fatty acids (EFAs) from which the sex hormones are made. Failure to address this means the underlying issues can never be dealt with by the body as it doesn't have the resources. Nutritional deficiencies can be made worse unfortunately by orthodox treatment which often involves putting you on the Pill. One of the side effects of the Pill is that the body has to use its meagre store of EFAs and B vitamins, in order to process it. So, if a deficiency of these is causing the problem, going on the Pill can exacerbate it!

HOW TO TREAT PCOS

Current medical treatments include, hormonal treatments such as the Pill which not only risks exacerbating the underlying hormonal imbalances, but has been linked to all sorts of health problems – and can also make nutritional deficiencies that may be part of the problem, worse.

It is therefore sensible to take an approach which looks to right the underlying imbalance which is the root cause of the problem.

The first step is to reduce your exposure to chemical toxicity and the xenoestrogens as far as possible, followed by ensuring the liver is working optimally to excrete excess levels of hormone.

In practice this means:

- Choosing organic food wherever possible
- Choosing chemical-free skincare and toiletries
- Choosing chemical-free, environmentally friendly household products
- Avoiding garden chemicals of all sorts
- Never using plastic in a microwave oven
- Never drinking from plastic bottles (ideally have your own water filter fitted at home to remove any residues from tap water)

As all toxins, including excess estrogens are removed via the liver, ensuring good liver function is necessary – and as the bowel is used as the means of excreting these processed toxins which are bound into waste fibre then a properly functioning bowel and plenty of fibre in the diet are important.

There is a separate fact sheet of foods which are particularly beneficial for the liver, but also take the following supplements:

- Milk thistle – improves overall liver function
- Dandelion Root or Dandelion & Burdock – traditional herbs that are excellent for liver function
- MSM – helps improve the pathways used for hormone excretion

In addition it is wise to take a potent antioxidant formula, either as a supplement or a superfood powder, to mitigate some of the inflammation and damage caused by the high hormone levels.

PCOS AND DIET

The easiest way to implement the necessary cleansing dietary changes is to follow the principles of introducing more alkaline foods into the diet – see fact sheet on Acid or Alkaline. This works by cutting back on the more ‘acid’ or toxicifying foods in the short term, and boosting levels of those that give more benefit.

By improving aspects of diet you can also help to manage your symptoms. There is a link between a diet low in fruit and vegetables, and high in man-made fats (ie margarines), processed meats and red meat with these types of issues.

Improving the levels of fresh fruit and vegetables with every meal also increases fibre levels in the diet. Replace man-made fats such as margarine and the hydrogenated or trans fats with ‘natural’ fats such as butter. Preferably always buy organic to avoid the hormone residues that standard farming routinely uses – you’ve got enough of these already without adding to them!

Essential fatty acids are also important in aiding with hormone balance in the body so increase the levels of ‘good’ fats in your diet from foods such as oily fish, avocados, nuts and seeds or take an Omega 3 supplement.

There are some plants which contain what are called phytoestrogens. These are very weak plant oestrogen mimics, and for anyone – male or female – with signs of oestrogen excess increasing the level of these in your diet is important as they have the effect of blocking the oestrogen receptors on the body, thereby preventing the much stronger xenoestrogens using these same receptor sites to enter the body.

Some examples are soy products, wholegrains, beans, dark leafy green vegetables such as cabbage, fennel, celery, parsley, rhubarb, hops, linseed oil, nuts and seeds but see the fact sheet on Phytoestrogenic Foods for full information.

Be aware grapefruit interferes with oestrogen breakdown in the body.

PCOS AND STRESS

Stress will also have an impact on nutritional status, as stress increases quite dramatically the body's need for nutrients, will adversely affect blood sugar levels as well as contributing to some of the PCOS issues due to high cortisol levels. For strategies to manage this effectively see fact sheet Stress.

PCOS AND YOUR SKIN

It is a very common effect of PCOS that skin flare up and acne are routine, whatever your age. Acne is an inflammatory condition of the skin, caused by fat soluble toxins being eliminated through the skin. Internal toxicity, as well as fat combustion in the body needs to be addressed (see fact sheet Acne).

PCOS AND BLOOD SUGAR IMBALANCES

If there are signs of insulin resistance the resultant blood sugar issues also need to be addressed. See the fact sheet Insulin Resistance and Syndrome X.

SUPPLEMENT REGIME FOR PCOS

The following supplements are recommended for use:

Superfoods Formula

Vitamin B complex with good levels of B6 or P5P

Zinc

Magnesium

Omega 3 EPA or Flaxseed Oil

In addition the following herbs can help:

For Hormonal Imbalance

Black Cohosh (Cimicifuga racemosa) -Also known as black snakeroot and bugbane, Black Cohosh is a medicinal root which has been traditionally used to treat female hormonal issues. It contains potent phytochemicals and has been approved by the German government as an alternative to HRT. It is not oestrogenic in its action, but actually works as something called a SERM (selective oestrogen receptor modulator). This means that it is able to block oestrogen receptors in places such as the womb and the breast where over-stimulation of the receptor sites can lead to cancer, but can stimulate the receptor

sites in places such as the bones and brain, where it is beneficial. This selectivity makes it an excellent choice for managing hormonal imbalance.

There were press reports several years ago around the safety of Black Cohosh with regard to liver damage, but government agencies in both Europe and America have investigated and found no scientific proof of this. Millions of women use this herb globally without problems. It is available as a tincture, or in capsule form.

Chaste Tree (*Vitex Agnus Castus*) - A useful hormone regulator this is used for both menstrual and menopausal issues. It is recognised as having a progesterogenic effect on the body and can help with oestrogen-progesterone balance. It works on the pituitary gland, which is responsible for sending messages to the ovary to release hormones and helps to balance either way – reduce levels if too high and boost if too low. It also helps with mood swings, anxiety and tension. Can be taken as tablets or tincture.

Maca - Maca is derived from a cruciferous root native to the Andes. Deemed a superfood for its many properties it helps with libido, stress, energy and hormone balancing and has been reported to help with hot flushes. Its benefits are cumulative so take daily – it is an excellent addition to smoothies in powder form, or can be taken as capsules. It also helps to balance cortisol levels thereby helping to mitigate stress. Available as a powdered root.

Dong Quai (*Angelica sinensis*)

An invigorating blood tonifier, it offers protective effects to the heart and circulation and helps lowered vitality. It is also helpful for both hot flushes and night sweats with a long history of use for these. It has been shown to reduce their impact within one month, as well as being helpful for fatigue and disturbed sleep problems. Can be taken as tincture or tablets.

For Blood Sugar Imbalance and Stress

Licorice Root (*glycyrrhiza glabra*) – a versatile herb with adaptogenic properties. 50 times sweeter than sugar, it is a powerful anti-inflammatory as well as being an adrenal agent, immune modulator, liver protector, gentle laxative and aid to help mitigate sugar cravings. Can be taken as a tincture or tablets.

For Liver Support -

Milk Thistle (*silymarin marianum*) - Milk thistle does not balance hormones as such, but with any condition where you are seeking to do this it is important to ensure and improve liver function, as the liver clears out used hormones through various detoxification pathways. If these are not working efficiently hormone levels can remain high. Milk thistle supports good liver function. Can be taken as a tincture or tablets.

Dandelion Root(*Taraxacum officinale*) – dandelion has an astonishing range of health benefits. Its leaves are edible and often added to salads, and the root is one of the most useful detoxifying herbs, working with the liver and gallbladder to remove waste products. Can be taken as a tincture or capsules.

Women with PCOS usually have difficult periods so have a look at the Pre-menstrual Syndrome fact sheet and follow the necessary advice, depending upon the problems you have.

NEW****

Redox signalling molecules were discovered relatively recently and have been shown to be fundamental to health at a cellular level, contributing greatly to balanced body systems or homeostasis. The science behind redox signalling molecules and the fundamental role they play in health and healing is developing fast.

Available as both a liquid for internal use and a gel for topical use, there is a large body of anecdotal evidence showing its effectiveness with aiding, amongst other things, substantially improved hormone balance in the body.

Not available through retail outlets, this biotechnology product comes direct from the manufacturer.
Go to this link for further information: www.lifedesigns.teamasea.com