

Patient information from BMJ

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Polycystic ovary syndrome: what treatments work?

Polycystic ovary syndrome is a common hormone problem that affects women. It can make your menstrual periods less regular, and you may have trouble getting pregnant. But there are good treatments and things you can do yourself that may help.

What treatments work?

If you are diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) it means that your hormones are not in balance. The hormones made by your ovaries are the ones most affected. They are called oestrogens, androgens, and progesterone.

These hormones affect a lot of things that go on in your body, including when you have your period, when your ovaries release eggs, how hair grows on your face and body, and the condition of your skin.

Treatment for PCOS depends on what symptoms you get, and whether or not you want to get pregnant.

If you are having trouble getting pregnant, there are fertility treatments that may help. Ask for our leaflet, *Fertility problems: what treatments work?* for more information about this.

Losing weight

If you are overweight, one of the first things that your doctor will suggest is losing weight. Losing some weight, even if it's not much, may help your body to ovulate normally. This may help with getting pregnant. However, it may not make much difference for unwanted hair or acne.

Losing weight will work only if you are overweight. Don't try to lose weight if you're already at a healthy weight. If you're not sure, ask your doctor.

No one diet has been shown to be better than another for helping women with PCOS lose weight. The key is to find a diet you can stick to.

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Hair removal

If your main problem is unwanted hair on your face and body, you've probably tried different methods of hair removal.

Shaving or using depilatory creams removes hair above the root, but it grows back after a day or two. Waxing pulls hair out by the roots, so it lasts a little longer. These treatments can be done at home or in a beauty clinic.

Electrolysis aims to damage the root of the hair, so it doesn't grow back at all. Laser treatments slow down the growth of hair. After about four treatments, the hair may stop coming back. But both treatments can be expensive and time-consuming, and some women find them painful.

Lots of private clinics offer laser hair removal. If you decide to have this treatment, make sure the clinic you choose is properly registered.

A cream called eflornithine slows down hair growth on the face. You have to get it from a doctor. If other treatments have not helped, you could ask your doctor about it.

Medicines (if you want to get pregnant)

If you want to get pregnant, a medicine called metformin may help control your periods and reduce unwanted hair.

Metformin is also used to treat people with diabetes. It helps control the levels of sugar in your blood. But it also seems to help some women with PCOS. You're likely to have more regular periods if you take metformin. This might make it easier for you to get pregnant.

Some women who take metformin have side effects. But these are mostly mild. You might feel some nausea or heartburn, or get diarrhoea.

Other treatments can help stimulate your ovaries, so they are more likely to release eggs. We have more information about these in our fertility treatment leaflet. Some examples are clomifene and gonadotrophins.

Medicines (if you don't want to get pregnant)

If you don't want to get pregnant and you are having problems with irregular periods, unwanted hair, or spots, your doctor may suggest you take the contraceptive pill. This is the first medicine you are likely to be offered.

The pill may make you put on weight. All women taking the combined oestrogen and progestogen pill have a slightly higher risk of breast cancer and of getting a blood clot in their veins (deep vein thrombosis).

If you've tried taking the pill and it hasn't helped, or if you have a lot of unwanted hair, your doctor may suggest anti-androgen drugs. These reduce the amount of androgen hormones in your body and may help reduce unwanted hair. They should only be prescribed by a specialist.

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You have to be careful not to get pregnant while taking these drugs, as they can harm your unborn baby. You'll need to take these drugs for a long time (six months to 18 months) to see the full effect. If you stop taking them, the hair will start growing back again.

Anti-androgen drugs have side effects which can be serious. You should discuss them with your doctor before you start taking them.

Your doctor may also suggest metformin, sometimes along with either the pill or an anti-androgen drug.

For more background information on PCOS see our leaflet *Polycystic ovary syndrome: what is it?*

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