

What you need to know about PCOS

Polycystic ovary syndrome (or PCOS) is incredibly common, affecting as many as [10% of reproductive-age women](#). The hormonal condition can lead to irregular menstrual cycles, no period at all (aka amenorrhea), and difficulty getting pregnant.



What is PCOS?

PCOS is a hormonal condition that affects how your ovaries work. Instead of an egg being made and released every month, the egg doesn't grow properly or isn't released so you don't ovulate regularly. Without ovulation, it is not possible to become pregnant.

What causes PCOS?

While common, the exact cause of PCOS isn't entirely understood. PCOS may be caused by:

- High level of androgen hormones (hormones that contribute to growth and reproduction)
- High levels of insulin
- Heredity (it can run in your family)



What are common symptoms of PCOS?

If you have any of the following symptoms, be sure to tell your doctor so you can explore if you may have PCOS:

- Irregular periods (more common, less common, or none at all)
- Hair growth on the face, chin, or other atypical areas
- Acne on the back, upper back, and chest
- Skin darkening and skin tags
- Weight management issues
- Thinning hair on the scalp

How is PCOS diagnosed?

Currently, there's no diagnostic test for PCOS. Here are some steps your doctor may take to diagnose PCOS:

- 01 Ask about your medical history**
Questions could include whether or not you have irregular periods, skipped periods, or have experienced sudden weight gain.
- 02 Physical exam**
Your doctor will look for outward symptoms of PCOS, such as acne, dark skin patches tags, or excessive hair growth.
- 03 Pelvic exam**
Doctors may perform a pelvic exam to check for any growths or abnormalities.
- 04 Blood work**
They'll test for higher than normal androgen hormone levels.
- 05 Ultrasound**
Your doctor may perform an ultrasound to check for polycystic ovaries.

If other conditions have been ruled out and 2-3 common PCOS symptoms have been found during these steps, you may be diagnosed with PCOS.

What are the treatment options?

There isn't a cure for PCOS, but your doctor can help you manage it and curb long-term side effects. Your treatment may include:

A change in diet and activity

Healthy eating habits and exercising can help your body use insulin more effectively and even help regulate your period. You can work with a nutritionist to create healthy eating habits, or find a movement routine you enjoy (like daily walks).

Birth control pills

Hormonal birth control can also help regulate your cycle (it can also reduce the common PCOS side effect of acne).

Diabetes medication

Diabetes medication is used to lower insulin resistance, reduces androgen levels, and can restore normal ovulation

The bottom line

PCOS is quite common, but far too many people go without help managing their symptoms. If you have any of the above symptoms, talk to your provider right away. If you're planning to become pregnant in the future or actively trying to conceive, it's especially important to work with a provider.