

Polycystic
Ovary Syndrome
(PCOS): When your body doesn't feel like Yours

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INTRODUCTION

PCOS affects more than just periods and fertility. Many people with PCOS experience changes in mood, body confidence, self-esteem and their relationship with food [5].

Living with visible symptoms such as acne, weight changes, excess hair growth or hair thinning can feel frustrating, upsetting and isolating and can affect your relationship with your body [6, 7, 8].

If you have struggled with body image, dieting, emotional eating or feeling out of control around food these are understandable and more common in PCOS than people realise [9].



Where to find support



Verity [2]

<https://www.verity-pcos.org.uk/>



PCOS Relief [3]

<https://www.pcosrelief.org/>



BEAT [4]

<https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/>



Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS): When your body doesn't feel like Yours



An overview for those suffering with PCOS and issues with body image and disordered eating

Disclaimer

Any research or evidence quoted is continuously advancing and any language used in this asset is not intended to stigmatise. If you're affected by anything in this resource, seek help from your GP and primary care team.

The term "women" is used throughout this resource in line with existing literature. However, PCOS also affects people who do not identify as women, including gender-diverse individuals with ovaries, and this information is intended to be inclusive of all experiences.

PCOS has been renamed to Polyendocrine Metabolic Ovarian Syndrome (PMOS) however this is going to be a gradual change to avoid confusion with patients and clinicians [1]. This leaflet will still use PCOS when referring to the disorder.

What is PCOS?

Affects 1 in 10 women [1]

It is one of the most common hormonal conditions affecting women [10]

Common Symptoms

Irregular or absent periods [12]

Fatigue [15]

Weight Changes [13]

Acne and Skin Concerns [16]

Fertility Difficulties [14]

Excess hair growth (Hirsutism) [17]

PCOS also links to insulin resistance, meaning that your body struggles to use insulin effectively [18]

This then leads to an increase in hunger, cravings and changes in energy levels [19]

Combining this with hormonal changes it can make eating more challenging especially when combined with clinicians' advice to lose weight [20]

PCOS and Body Image

Body image refers to the thoughts, feelings and behaviours you have related to your appearance [21]

Women are often pressured to be thin, hairless and feminine [22]

Due to symptoms of PCOS women may feel they don't fit the societal ideals therefore creating a negative body image [23, 24]

This negative body image may lead to unhealthy eating behaviours [25, 26]

Many women with PCOS feel this way with one study revealing that 54% experience body image issues [27]

Eating Disorders and PCOS

Hormonal changes, cravings, insulin resistance, body dissatisfaction, repeated dieting and emotional stress can all influence eating patterns [28]

Women with PCOS are up to more likely to experience an eating disorder [29]

60%

This does not mean everyone with PCOS develops an eating disorder - however those with struggles with food **deserve to be taken seriously.**

Restrictive Eating

You might notice

- Skipping meals
- Strict food rules
- Constant Dieting
- Feeling guilt after eating [29]

Weight loss is often first-line treatment with PCOS. However, repeated restriction can increase feelings of hunger and contribute to cycles of overeating [30]

Emotional Eating

Emotional eating can be a response to stress, sadness, frustration and feeling overwhelmed [31]

Emotional eating may affect **30-50%** of women with PCOS [32]

Can be a way of coping with distress when body image concerns, anxiety and stigma are present and can lead to the development of binge eating disorder [33]

Binge Eating Disorder

You may:

- Feel out of control around food
- Eat quickly and past fullness
- Feel guilt or shame afterwards [34]

May be up to **four times greater risk** for Binge Eating Disorder [35]

Binge eating occurs in up to **60%** of women with PCOS yet receiving a diagnosis or support is difficult [36]

Night Eating Syndrome

- Night Eating Syndrome is characterised by recurring episodes of excessive intake of food after dinner and during the night [37]
- Co-occurs with Binge Eating Disorder in 15-20% of cases [38]
- Aggravates PCOS related hormonal and metabolic issues [39]
- Impacts 13% of women with PCOS compared to 1% of the general population [40]

Bulimia

- Bulimia stems from binge eating where large amounts of food are consumed in one sitting. This leads to feelings of shame and guilt and then need to get rid of the food through unhealthy ways such as vomiting [41]
- There is a large focus on weight and body shape even when trying to think of other things [42]
- Bulimic behaviours may occur in up to 12% of women with PCOS compared to 1.5% of the general population [43]

When to seek support

If you notice:

- Food or weight takes up a lot of your thoughts
- Feeling out of control around eating
- Feeling guilt or shame after eating
- Avoiding meals or frequently restricting food
- Your mood, anxiety or body image is worsening
- Eating patterns are affecting your daily life

Treatment

- Start by booking a GP appointment if you have concerns regarding body image and disordered eating
- The main treatment is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) - it can help break unhealthy cycles and develop healthy coping strategies [44]

What healthcare professionals should know

- Weight stigma can negatively affect mental health and eating behaviours [45]
- Routine screening for disordered eating is recommended [46]
- Weight-inclusive psychologically informed approach can improve outcomes [47]

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