



Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome and Heart Disease Risk

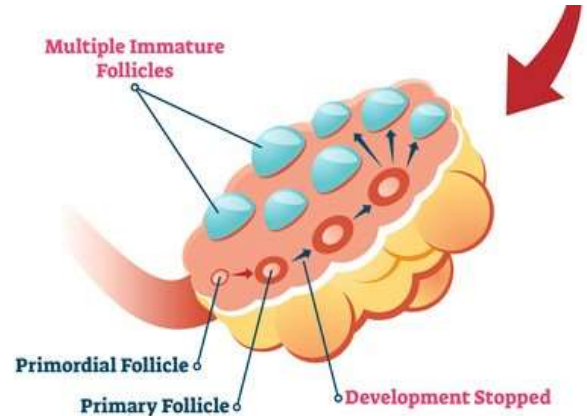
Patient-Centered Education from the National Lipid Association

What is Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, or PCOS?

PCOS is a common hormonal disorder that affects women of all ages. Up to 1 in 10 female teens and adult women, and possibly more, may have PCOS.

PCOS is easy to diagnose. Women with PCOS often have irregular or absent menstrual periods, increased belly fat, overweight, facial hair, acne, and/or loss of scalp hair. Some may have difficulty becoming pregnant. Testing usually shows cysts on the ovaries (see Figure). Biopsy of the ovaries is rarely needed. Lab tests may show abnormal levels of blood sugar, cholesterol, triglycerides, and male hormones. Pre-diabetes and metabolic syndrome are common.

Figure: What the ovaries look like in PCOS. Egg follicles fail to mature, leading to buildup of multiple immature follicles in the ovaries.



PCOS may increase a woman’s risk of future heart disease. The metabolic state from PCOS, especially when it causes pre-diabetes or abnormal cholesterol, may raise heart disease risk over time. The good news is that the risks from PCOS can be reduced by a healthy lifestyle and, if needed, medication. This information from the National Lipid Association (NLA) provides general guidance for reducing heart disease risks from PCOS. Your gynecologist or other qualified healthcare provider may recommend other treatments.

Monitoring Heart Disease Risk in PCOS

Because women with PCOS have more risk factors for future heart disease, the NLA recommends cholesterol and diabetes testing every 2 years or so, even in younger women.

The NLA recommends that all women age 40-75 years undergo ‘risk assessment’ to calculate future heart disease risk over 10 years. Your provider can do this step for you.

The NLA recommends keeping your LDL-cholesterol level less than 100 mg/dl, and non-HDL-cholesterol less than 130 mg/dl, if you have PCOS.

If your cholesterol levels are higher, lifestyle changes are the first step. If your numbers remain very high, medications may also be needed.

Lifestyle Changes to Reduce Heart Risks



Eat healthier. Reduce added sugars and refined grains, and eat fiber-rich vegetables and fruits, whole grains, and lean proteins. If needed, ask to be referred to a registered dietitian.



Exercise more. Walk, bike or do other cardio exercise for at least 30 minutes daily and 150 minutes weekly. Consider a low-cost gym membership or a personal trainer to get started.



Do not smoke or vape. Nicotine can damage your heart arteries and greatly increase your health risks if you have high cholesterol from PCOS.



Reduce stress. Practice meditation or yoga. Enroll in a support group. Take advice and treatment from qualified professionals only.