**Holistic approach to Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)**

Millions of women in the UK and around the world suffer from Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome. We are going to take a look at what PCOS is and how to combat it from a holistic perspective using food and complementary therapies.

**What is PCOS?**

PCOS is when a number of cysts develop around the edge of the ovaries and a failure of the ovaries to release eggs. Normally there are also higher levels of male hormones, or male hormones are more active than normal. Some of the symptoms of PCOS are:

* excessive body hair (hirsutism)
* irregular or light periods
* problems getting pregnant (infertility)
* weight gain
* acne
* hair loss from the head

**What causes PCOS?**

The exact cause of PCOS is unknown but it often runs in families. Women that are overweight are more at risk of developing PCOS. Many women with PCOS also have a family history of diabetes and high cholesterol. It is also believed that insulin may play a role. Insulin is a hormone that controls sugar levels in the body. Many women with PCOS have too much insulin in their body, which contributes to the increased production and activity of male hormones. Being overweight increases the amount of insulin that your body produces.

**Can PCOS be treated?**

There is no cure for PCOS but symptoms can be treated allopathically by specific types of contraceptive pills to help regulate the menstrual cycle and improve hair growth.

**Looking at PCOS from a holistic point of view.**

**Reflexology and Spearmint tea**

Reflexology is a complementary therapy based on the belief that there are reflex areas in the feet and hands which are believed to correspond to all organs and parts of the body. Reflexology works on an individual basis and may alleviate and improve symptoms such as everyday stress and tension. A practitioner treating someone with PCOS will pay attention to the endocrine and reproductive systems, helping to bring back balance where there is an imbalance.

In a pilot study in Denmark, 8 women aged between 24-34 years old with long menstrual cycles (33-90 days) and PCOS, were given 19 sessions of Reflexology over a period of 5-6 months. Medical histories, gynaecological exams, ultrasound scans, blood tests and medical observations were done. The results in this experimental group were that the length of menstrual cycles and the number of follicles in ovaries were reduced. **Reflexology** was shown to be effective in reducing the length of the menstrual cycle and number of follicles in women who had been diagnosed with PCOS; although very encouraging, further research is needed with a larger group of participants.

Similarly, specific research took place in Turkey that has shown that spearmint tea has anti-androgenic properties in females with hirsutism. This study was a 30 day randomized controlled trial. Forty two volunteers were randomized to take spearmint tea twice a day for a one month period and compared with a placebo herbal tea. At 0, 15 and 30 days of the study serum androgen hormone levels and gonadotrophins were checked. Forty one of the forty two patients completed the study. The result showed free and total testosterone levels were significantly reduced over the 30 day period in the spearmint tea group.

**The effects of nutrition on PCOS:**

In the Channel 4 programme The Food Hospital, Lauren, a 24 year old woman suffering with PCOS from the age of 15 with side effects such as excess hair growth (hirsutism) was put on a food plan.

Lauren’s food plan was designed to help balance her hormones which should lower her insulin levels. It was effectively a low GI diet. GI (glycaemic index) ranks foods according to their effect on blood sugar levels so by controlling Lauren’s calorie and carbohydrate intake her weight and insulin levels should drop. This could improve the regularity of her periods, aid with weight loss and possibly improve her excessive hair growth. If her high testosterone level was mainly being caused by diet, these adjustments could help.

Lauren’s plan consisted of pulses, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Simple changes such as eating wholegrain bread instead of white bread burns energy more slowly, creating less insulin. The nutritionist increased Lauren’s vegetable intake to 50% per meal to help with weight loss and increase vitamin intake. Fatty and processed meats were swapped for pulses, such as chickpeas, which have good protein levels.

The outcome was Lauren took on board the advice about the need to lose weight and even regained enough confidence to begin swimming. She found her menstrual cycle became more regular and, even though this was not something that the team were looking to improve through her diet, her hirsutism was also reduced. (<http://foodhospital.channel4.com/cases/case-file-lauren/>)

In reviewing the above approaches we see that a considerable amount can be achieved through nutrition and complementary therapy. Lifestyle changes need to be made and we need to take back control from our illness. It requires mind-set, determination and will power to make that change. I recommend that you take some time and plan ahead, have achievable targets and build on them.

Mario Demetriou MAR CNHC

Reflexologist.

(Denmark, Triangle Fertility Clinic in Hellerup, Denmark. Citation: Schumann, LV., “Effects of Reflexology on Women Suffering from Polycystic Ovaries (PCO) and Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS).” Danish Reflexology Association FDZ

(Spearmint herbal tea has significant anti-androgen effects in polycystic ovarian syndrome. A randomized controlled trial. Grant P. Phytother Res. 2010 Feb;24(2):186-8.)

