

Holistic approach to Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)



What is PCOS?

PCOS is when cysts develop around the edge of the ovaries and the ovaries fail to release eggs. More active or higher levels of male hormones have both been associated with PCOS. It is a syndrome, which is a collection of symptoms which may present in any combination from just a few of them to all of them. Some of the symptoms of PCOS are:

- hirsutism
- irregular or light periods
- problems getting pregnant
- weight gain
- acne
- hair loss from the head

There is no cure for PCOS but specific types of contraceptive pills can help regulate the menstrual cycle and improve hair growth.

What causes PCOS?

The exact cause of PCOS is unknown, but...

- ...it often runs in families.
- ...overweight women have a higher risk of PCOS
- ...women with PCOS often have a family history of diabetes and high cholesterol.
- ...women with PCOS often have too much insulin in their body, contributing to the increased production and activity of male hormones. Being overweight increases the amount of insulin that your body produces.

Looking at PCOS holistically.

Reflexology and Spearmint tea

In a pilot study in Denmark, 8 women aged between 24-34 years old with long menstrual cycles (33-90 days) and PCOS received 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 their ovaries were both 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; however, 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 of 42 volunteers, who took 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. 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, a 24 year old woman who had PCOS from the age of 15, with side effects such as excess hair growth (hirsutism), was put on a food plan.

The 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 calorie and carbohydrate intake, weight and insulin levels should drop. This could improve the regularity of her periods, aid weight loss and possibly improve excessive hair growth. If the high testosterone level was mainly being caused by diet, these adjustments could help.

The 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 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 that the woman recognized 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 willpower to make that change.

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References

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