

Diet sheet

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome

What is Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome?

Polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) is a health condition linked with an increased amount of certain hormones e.g. testosterone and an inability to control blood sugar levels (insulin resistance).

It is thought that as many as 1 in 5 pre-menopausal women may be affected to various degrees by this syndrome.

PCOS symptoms include:

- ◆ Irregular periods or absent periods
- ◆ Excessive hair (hirsutism) particularly on the face, chest or stomach
- ◆ Acne
- ◆ Fertility problems, difficulty becoming pregnant
- ◆ Difficulty in maintaining a healthy body weight

The condition has long-term health implications as women with PCOS may have an increased risk of developing diabetes and heart disease.

What causes PCOS?

While the exact cause of **PCOS** is unknown, it may run in families, so the tendency to develop the syndrome may be inherited. Also, individuals with **PCOS** show an inability to respond properly to insulin – a condition called **insulin resistance**.

Insulin Resistance

Insulin is a hormone produced in the pancreas which helps your body use energy (sugar/ glucose) from food. Normally insulin is very efficient at moving sugar into cells. However, the cells of some people do not respond to the normal amount of insulin which results in more insulin production.

The excess of insulin acts on the ovaries to make more testosterone and it also stimulates the body's fat cells to store more of the calories from your food as a fat. This means you put on weight easily, even though you are eating the same amount

Why is diet important for someone with PCOS?

A healthy, well-balanced diet is one of the most important steps in managing PCOS. The right food choice will help you with weight management and keeping insulin levels under control.

You should aim to:

1. Eat smaller, more frequent meals and snacks. This will help to improve your blood insulin levels and will keep hunger pangs away.
2. Include starchy and fibre-rich foods in your meals. Follow the **Glycaemic Index guide** on **page 3**.
3. Reduce the amount of sugar and sugary foods in your diet.
4. Eat less fat.
5. Eat more fruits and vegetables.
6. Limit your alcohol intake.

The Glycaemic Index – How it can help you

Starchy foods (or carbohydrates) **such as** bread, rice, cereals, pasta and potatoes are naturally **low** in fat and a healthy choice if eaten in moderation.

The **Glycaemic Index (GI)** is a ranking of carbohydrate foods based on the rate at which they raise blood glucose levels.

The lower the GI the lower the rise in blood sugar, so you gain better blood sugar control.

Foods with a low GI rating are also useful for weight reduction, as they are more filling than foods with a high GI rating.

Easy GI Swaps

Instead of high GI foods like:	Choose lower GI foods like:
- Maize or wheat-based breakfast cereals (cornflakes, weetabix, bran flakes, cheerios, shredded wheat)+	- Oat-based cereals like muesli (no added sugar) - High fibre cereals like All-Bran, Fruit & Fibre, Sultana Bran
- White or fine wholemeal bread	- Wholegrain or mixed grain breads (e.g. granary, rye bread, linseed bread) - Pumpernickel - Pitta bread - Sour dough or stone-ground flour breads
- White rice, jasmine rice	- Basmati rice - Wild rice
- Mashed potatoes, jacket potatoes, instant potato	- Boiled potatoes, pasta, sweet potatoes, beans, lentils, couscous

Examples of Low GI snacks

1. A small tub of low fat yoghurt
2. A small can of baked beans
3. A slice of grainy toast with reduced sugar jam or low fat cheese
4. Pitta bread or 2-3 oatmeal biscuits with hummous
5. A slice of raisin toast or fruit loaf
6. A handful of unsalted nuts and almonds
7. Two scoops of low fat ice-cream
8. A piece of fresh fruit
9. A small bowl of plain popcorn

Remember: Low GI foods = Good PCOS control

Factors that affect the Glycaemic Index (GI)

Food Combining Mix high GI foods with low GI foods in your meals. This combination will give an overall intermediate GI. **For example**, high fibre vegetables have low GI and tend to reduce the glycaemic effects of the higher rated foods such as potatoes.

Quantity **Large quantities** of even **low GI rated foods** can still cause blood sugar increase.

Sugar and sugary foods

Eating too much sugar can aggravate the problem of insulin resistance. This does not mean you need to follow a sugar-free diet. Use diet, low sugar or sugar free squashes and fizzy drinks. Save sweets, cakes and biscuits for occasional treats instead of eating every day.

Foods containing fat

Try to cut down on the fat you eat, particularly saturated animal fats, which are linked to heart disease. Eating less fat and fatty foods will also help you lose weight.

Try low fat spreads or use butter, mayonnaise or other full fat spreads **sparingly**.

Choose low fat dairy foods like semi-skimmed or skimmed milk and low fat yoghurts. Use low fat cheese such as cottage cheese, Quark, curd cheese and reduced-fat hard cheese or use strongly flavoured cheeses in smaller quantities e.g. grated rather than sliced.

Finally, grill, steam, poach, bake, boil, braise or dry roast **instead of** frying or roasting with fat.

Fruit and vegetables

Vegetables and **to a lesser degree fruits** should be the foundation of everyone's diet.

Fruits, and especially fruit juices, should be consumed in moderate amounts as they can affect your blood sugar. Eat just **one portion** of fruit at a time. Aim for five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.

A portion of fruit is:

- A piece of fruit (e.g. apple, banana or pear)
- A slice of a large fruit (e.g. melon, mango, pineapple)
- Two small fruits (e.g. satsumas, kiwis)
- A cupful of berries or grapes
- Half a serving spoon of dried fruit
- A glass of unsweetened fruit juice.

A portion of vegetables is 2-3 serving spoons or a bowl of salad.

Alcohol

Too much alcohol is not good for anyone's health and the maximum amount you should drink in one week is 14 units. **Aim for 1-2 alcohol-free days.**

One unit of alcohol is:

- Half a pint of beer, lager or cider
- One pub measure of spirit (i.e. whiskey, gin)
- One standard glass of wine
- One pub measure of sherry, aperitif or liqueur

Sample Meal Plan

Breakfast

Porridge or high fibre cereal
Or Multigrain bread with reduced sugar jam
Tea

Mid-morning

Low fat yoghurt
Or fresh fruit

Lunch

Tuna and salad sandwich using wholegrain bread
with low fat dressing
Fresh fruit

Mid-afternoon

Fresh fruit
Or slice of fruit loaf

Dinner

Pasta with (lean) bolognese sauce
Green salad with low fat mayonnaise
Sugar free jelly

Other life-style issues to consider

Exercise helps to improve insulin sensitivity. **Aim for about 30 minutes of moderate activity on most days. If you are trying to lose weight aim for 60 minutes most days.**

Remember:

Healthy lifestyle = Practice, Perseverance

And finally ...

Websites of PCOS support groups in the UK

www.verity.pcos.org.uk
www.pcos-uk.org.uk