



Living Well With Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)



If you have polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), take charge of your health by learning all you can about it. You can start right here by learning about healthier habits and routines. You can also check out more information under “What is PCOS?” in the Body section of girlshealth.gov. You’ll find everything from medications to getting rid of unwanted hair. If you take smart steps to cope with PCOS, you’ll feel better physically, but chances are you also will feel pretty proud of yourself for taking good care of your body — and your future.

Eating right and exercising are two terrific ways to manage your PCOS. They can lower your blood sugar to healthier levels, help get your hormones balanced, reduce your risk of developing other health problems, and help you lose weight. And if you’re overweight, losing even 5 percent of your current weight can help get abnormal periods back on track.



Eating Right With PCOS

Many young women with PCOS are overweight and have trouble losing weight. This is because young women with PCOS often have higher levels of the hormone insulin in their blood. Insulin’s main job is to control blood sugar, but it also can make your body store fat. Eating right can help you control your insulin, help you feel better, keep your heart healthy, lower your risk of getting diabetes, and help you lose weight. Losing even a small amount of weight if you are overweight can improve PCOS symptoms.

What do I need to know about insulin and carbohydrates?

The insulin level in your blood goes up after you eat. It goes up the most after you eat or drink something

that contains carbohydrates. Carbohydrates are found in grains (bread, pasta, rice, cereal, and potatoes), vegetables, fruits, most snack foods (like chips, cookies, and candy), and sweet drinks like juice.

Are all carbohydrates the same?

No. If you eat two foods that have the same amount of carbohydrate, they may have a different effect on your insulin level. This effect has a lot to do with the type of carbohydrate the food has. Carbohydrate foods with fiber are usually the best if you are trying to keep your insulin level down. Carbohydrate foods with a lot of sugar cause insulin levels to go up and make you hungry sooner.

Try to choose high-fiber, low-sugar carbohydrate foods most of the time.

Instead of:	Choose:
Sweetened juice, canned fruit in heavy syrup, or sweetened applesauce	Fresh fruits or canned/frozen fruit with no sugar added or unsweetened applesauce
Starchy vegetables like potatoes, corn, and peas	Non-starchy fresh, frozen, or canned vegetables like carrots, spinach, or tomatoes
Refined grains made with white flour like white bread, white pasta, and white rice	Whole grains or darker grains like whole wheat pasta, brown rice, and whole wheat bread
Sugary cereals and sweetened grains like cereal bars, breakfast pastries, and donuts	High-fiber cereals like Shredded Wheat or All-Bran. Try to have a cereal that has at least 5 grams of fiber per serving. Sprinkle ¼ cup of bran cereal or unprocessed bran on a low-fiber cereal to increase the fiber.
Sugary drinks like soda or juice	Sugar-free drinks like water, diet soda, flavored water, and seltzer water
Sugary foods like cookies, cakes, and candy	Sugar-free foods like sugar-free gelatin, popsicles, yogurt, and pudding

Do I need to buy special foods?

You definitely don't need to go out of your way to buy special foods! Just like with any healthy diet plan, your meals should include mostly vegetables, fruits, whole grains, lean meats, and healthy fats. Most foods fit into a healthy diet for PCOS, but you should read food labels to help you pick the best choices. As you choose foods, consider these tips:

- **Look for high-fiber grains rather than low-fiber grains.** That means whole wheat bread instead of white bread, for example, and brown rice instead of white rice.
- **Don't be fooled by fat-free treats.** They usually have a lot of added sugar. Look for brands that have the least amount of sugar and the most fiber.
- **Be careful when picking sugar-free foods.** Some sugar-free foods (like baked goods) can raise your insulin levels because they have other high-carbohydrate ingredients like white flour. Other sugar-free foods have no effect on insulin because they are also carbohydrate-free. These foods (diet soda, sugar-free drinks, and sugar-free popsicles) make great additions to a PCOS diet.
- **Choose vegetables and fruits!** They are high in fiber and packed with vitamins and minerals.

What about non-carbohydrate foods like fats and proteins?

Non-carbohydrate foods include protein foods like meat, chicken, fish, eggs, beans, nuts, peanut butter, and vegetarian meat substitutes. They also include fats like oil, butter, cream cheese, and salad dressing. Combining foods that contain protein or fat with a carbohydrate will help keep insulin levels down. For example, instead of having bread by itself, have it together with some peanut butter or hummus.

Keep in mind that some fats are much healthier than others. Healthy fats are found in olive oil, canola oil, nuts, avocados, and fish. Choose healthy fats and proteins over butter, margarine, mayonnaise, full-fat cheese, and red meat.

Do I need to follow a diet that is extra high in protein?

No. Really high protein diets are not good diet options for teens because they can be low in some

important nutrients such as fiber, the B vitamins, and vitamin C. It is also important to remember that even if you limit your carbohydrate intake, overeating fat or protein can cause weight gain. You should aim for a diet that has some protein, carbohydrate, and fat.

If I choose the right foods, do I need to think about my portion sizes?

Yes! How much you eat has a big effect on your insulin level. This means it is usually better to have small meals and snacks during the day than it is to have three large meals.

If you have more questions about PCOS and nutrition, ask your doctor about talking to a nutritionist who has experience in working with teens with PCOS.

Stay positive! It can take time to lose weight. Remember that taking care of yourself by eating right is a success even if you don't see a big change in your weight.



Staying Fit With PCOS

Physical activity can be a great help if you have PCOS. Young women with PCOS often have high levels of the hormone insulin. Having high levels of insulin tells your body to store fat and may contribute to PCOS symptoms. But physical activity can lower your levels of insulin. Any increase in your activity helps, so find a sport or other activity that you like. Physical activity can be especially helpful in bringing down insulin after a meal. Regular activity can also help improve your mood and boost your energy.

If you aren't very active now, build up slowly. Work toward moving for at least 60 minutes every day.

Making physical activity fun is the key to keeping it an ongoing part of your life. We have three worksheets to help you figure out which physical activities you'll enjoy most and how to get started with them. You can find them with our PCOS information in the girlshealth.gov Reproductive Health section under our Body tab.

Visit www.girlshealth.gov for more information on fitness, dealing with stress, and building a healthy future!



Last updated May 2014