

PCOS and Nutrition Recommendations

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) is a hormonal imbalance that affects 6 – 7% of all women (1). Similar to diabetes, the body is ineffective in processing insulin and regulating glucose in the blood. Dietary intervention is essential to management, treatment and care. PCOS is the most common hormonal disorder among women of reproductive age and is genetically linked.

Women with PCOS encounter:

- A 40% higher risk of diabetes by the age of 40
- Increased cardiovascular risk
- Increased weight gain and decreased weight loss success
- Hyperinsulinemia
- Hyperlipidemia
- Struggles with acne and hirsutism
- Cystic ovaries, infertility and endometrial cancer
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Infertility

Women who struggle with PCOS should be encouraged to achieve a healthy weight, if they are overweight. Since insulin resistance plays a key role in this disease, a low glycemic diet has been the favored approach to weight loss, instead of commonly recommended approaches, including a low fat, high carbohydrate diet. It is believed that due to high levels of insulin in the body, carbohydrates (especially refined carbohydrates) are more readily stored as fat. Complex carbohydrates are believed to be a better choice, especially when combined with a fat or protein, to slow the release of carbohydrate into the blood.

Dietary recommendations for PCOS include (2):

- “Packaging” whole grain carbohydrates with a protein or a fat
- Choose unrefined carbohydrate sources with low glycemic indexes
- Make carbohydrates a smaller portion of the diet. Consuming more protein and vegetable based main dishes, and making pastas, breads, grains and cereals side items and smaller portions.
- Utilization of a multivitamin and consideration of a calcium supplementation for those who are not consuming 1,200 mg/day
- Consuming a minimum of 8 glasses of water a day
- Utilization of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Limited consumption of saturated fats and trans fats in the diet
- Exercise. Both aerobic and anaerobic exercises are necessary for weight management, cardiovascular health and metabolic functioning.

Treatment of PCOS often includes management of irregular menstrual cycles with an estrogen based birth control and an insulin lowering medication. Interventions for the

nutrition professional should focus on the above recommendations, including the behavioral work that needs to be done to manage insulin resistance and weight loss. Current PCOS research concludes that lifestyle factors, primarily dietary modification, are the most promising intervention for this disease.

References:

1. Setji, TL, Brown, AJ. Comprehensive clinical management of polycystic ovarian syndrome. *Minerva Med.* June 2007, 175-89.
2. McKittrick, M. PCOS and diet. OBGYN.net Publications. Retrieved on September 20, 2007: http://www.obgyn.net/pcos/pcos.asp?page=/pcos/articles/pcos_and_diet_mckittrick