

1

What is polycystic ovary syndrome?

➔ Key points

- ◆ Polycystic ovary syndrome affects at least 10% of the female population.
- ◆ 20% of all females have polycystic ovaries on ultrasound scan and may be at risk of developing symptoms.
- ◆ The symptoms of PCOS include irregular or absent periods, acne, excess body hair, weight gain, and difficulty becoming pregnant.

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is the name given to a condition resulting from an imbalance in sex hormone production. As a result of the hormonal imbalance, symptoms such as irregular periods, acne, excess facial and body hair, or scalp hair thinning may develop (Table 1.1). PCOS affects an estimated 10 per cent of premenopausal women although many women remain undiagnosed. A number of women may have PCOS but may not realize that this is the cause of their symptoms as it can be embarrassing going to see your doctor to complain about excess hair growth or mood swings. Some women may have infrequent or absent periods and may be relieved not to 'suffer' each month like their friends, so do not seek advice from their doctor about their periods. Some women are only diagnosed when they are being investigated for fertility problems. Some women may feel guilty about being overweight, are worried they will be told that it is their fault, and are therefore reluctant to go to their doctor about it.

Approximately 1 in 5 women of childbearing age have polycystic ovaries. This describes the appearance of the ovaries when they are seen on ultrasound scan. 'Polycystic' means multiple cysts, but in reality it refers to several tiny follicles below the surface of one or both ovaries (Fig. 1.1). In polycystic

Table 1.1 Occurrence of symptoms in women with PCOS

Women with PCOS may have one or more of the following:	
Irregular or absent periods	80%
Difficulty becoming pregnant	40%
Increased facial and body hair	70%
Acne and oily skin	20%
Thinning of scalp hair	15%
Weight gain and difficulty losing weight	50%

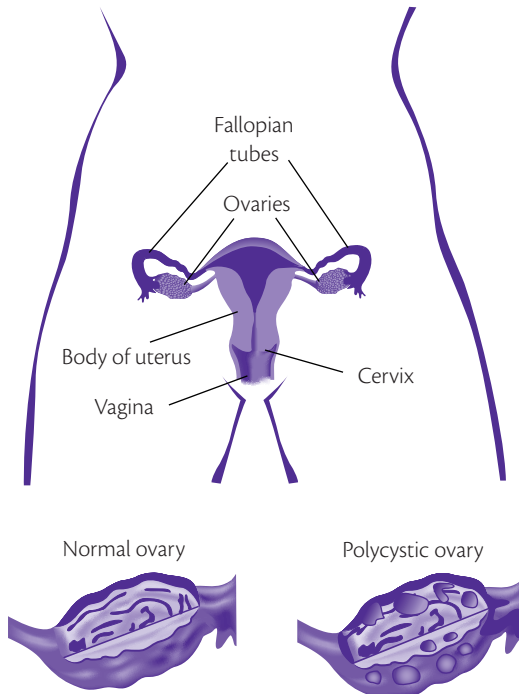


Figure 1.1 Normal versus polycystic ovaries.

ovaries, approximately twice as many follicles than usual will develop because of the hormonal disturbance, resulting in slightly larger than normal ovaries. PCOS is the name given to the condition in which women with polycystic ovaries have one or more symptoms (Table 1.1). One study showed that up to 80 per cent of women who had polycystic ovaries on ultrasound and who were previously thought to be asymptomatic actually had either irregular periods or unwanted hair.

Are these cysts harmful?

No. These cysts are only a few millimetres (<9 mm) in size, do not in themselves cause problems, and represent partially developed eggs that were not released. The word 'cyst' is misleading as what is seen on ultrasound are multiple tiny egg follicles. The follicles do not need surgery and are not associated with an increased risk of ovarian cancer. Removing the follicles will not improve any of the symptoms of PCOS.

