



WORKING OUT

for inner health



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An exercise physiologist will aid women with PCOS to engage in workouts vital for their health.

POLYCYSTIC ovary syndrome (PCOS) is the most common and the most complex endocrinopathy, affecting up to 18% of Australian women of reproductive age.

PCOS has reproductive (anovulation, subfertility), metabolic (obesity, insulin resistance, increased risk of type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease) and mental health (anxiety, depression, quality of life) consequences.

Evidence recommends lifestyle modification as first-line therapy; however, engaging women with PCOS in an appropriate physical activity program may be challenging.

Referral to an accredited exercise physiologist may be the best option to optimise health outcomes in this patient group.

Insulin resistance (IR) is a key clinical feature of PCOS and its prevalence and severity are

exacerbated by obesity. Concerningly, women with PCOS show a 2.8-fold higher annual weight gain compared to women without PCOS.

Weight gain exacerbates IR, which in turn drives hyperandrogenism and reproductive dysfunction.

A physical activity program is essential to reduce IR and the risk of chronic disease, and to promote weight maintenance or loss.

Evidence-based guidelines recommend an integrated lifestyle program, targeting sustained changes in nutrition, physical activity and health behaviours, as first-line therapy.

However, current trends show a focus primarily on nutritional

interventions targeting weight loss. This approach, without a sustained physical activity program, is unlikely to yield the desired long-term results.

The benefits of regular physical activity for women with PCOS include:

- reduction of IR and risk of type 2 diabetes
- improved body composition (prevents weight gain, reduces abdominal fat)
- 30–40% reduction of cardiovascular disease risk factors
- improved ovulation and fertility outcomes, and
- improved mental health outcomes.

Sixty-two per cent of women, including those with PCOS, do

not meet the Australian physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines.

All women should aim for:

- 20–40 minutes daily of moderate intensity exercise, or 75–150 minutes weekly of vigorous exercise, or a combination of both
- less inactivity (sitting less) and more incidental activity on most days of the week
- muscle strengthening exercises (resistance training) twice a week.

Women with PCOS often face greater barriers to physical activity, including a lack of confidence in their ability to maintain physical activity, fear of injury due to the burden of PCOS, as well as poor body image, depression and anxiety.

Thus engaging women with PCOS in physical activities is a significant challenge. While gym memberships and personal trainers are regularly recommended, they may exacerbate barriers to exercise. Fitness instructors are generally diploma/certificate qualified and not necessarily sympathetic to, or trained in, dealing with people who have underlying pathologies and mental health issues.

An accredited exercise physiologist is a specialist in the design and delivery of a personalised exercise prescription for people with chronic and complex diseases including PCOS. They are trained in dealing with barriers to physical activity and aim to equip their patients with the skills and confidence to guide their own physical activity programs for sustained engagement and improved health.

A secondary goal is to build fitness confidence to enable them to then join a fitness centre and work with personal trainers.

Accredited exercise physiologists can treat people via the allied health Medicare scheme for chronic disease and complex care with GP referral, as part of a team care plan, for up to five individual treatment sessions per year. They also attract private health fund rebates.

In summary, women with PCOS, especially those considered overweight or obese, need to be engaged in an integrated lifestyle program, including physical activity and dietary and behaviour changes.

Referral to an accredited exercise physiologist provides the patient with a personalised exercise prescription and support to increase confidence in effective self-management.

Jean Hailes for Women's Health is a national, not-for-profit organisation focusing on clinical care, innovative research and practical educational opportunities for health professionals and women.
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