



Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)

Acknowledgements

Jean Hailes acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continued connection to land, waters and culture. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

This resource has been developed in partnership between Jean Hailes for Women's Health and Alukura Women's Health Service on behalf of Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress), on the land of the Central Arrernte people.

We acknowledge the support and involvement of NT Health – Primary and Public Health, Central Australia.

We would also like to acknowledge the women of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) and surrounding communities who participated in consultations to help shape these resources.

Jean Hailes for Women's Health gratefully acknowledges the support of the Australian Government.

Feedback

We welcome all feedback and suggestions on how to improve this toolkit.

Send your feedback to education@jeanhailes.org.au



About us

About Jean Hailes

Jean Hailes for Women's Health is a national not-for-profit organisation committed to improving women's health across Australia through every life stage. We use the latest research to develop our website and resources on a range of topics, including polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), periods, sex and sexual health, menopause, endometriosis, and vulva, vagina, ovaries and uterus.

Jean Hailes takes a broad and inclusive approach to the topic of women's health. The terms 'women' and 'girls' are used throughout this resource to refer to all women, girls and gender-diverse people.



About Alukura

Alukura Women's Health Service is an Aboriginal women-only place in Alice Springs caring for the health of Aboriginal women and infants. The name 'Alukura' is a Central Arrernte word meaning women's camp or women's place. The service is provided in a comfortable and culturally safe place for clients.

Alukura provides specialised women's health and midwifery case-managed maternity care. It is guided by traditional Aboriginal grandmother's law to preserve and recognise Aboriginal women's law, culture and languages, as they relate to pregnancy, childbirth and the care of Aboriginal women and babies. With a multi-disciplinary team approach, Alukura ensures Aboriginal women and babies have access to best practice comprehensive primary health care.

Alukura is part of Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, which is the largest Aboriginal community-controlled health organisation in the Northern Territory.



How to use this toolkit

This toolkit has been designed to help health professionals and other health workers deliver education about periods and the menstrual cycle and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) to Aboriginal women. It includes two presentations:

- Periods and the menstrual cycle
- Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS).

These are available as hard-copy flipcharts or can be downloaded electronically from www.jeanhailes.org.au/resources/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-resources

Using this toolkit

Before using the presentations, we recommend you read through them in full and ensure you understand them.

The presentations have been developed to use with Aboriginal women and girls in Central Australia and might not be appropriate for use with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in other parts of Australia. We recommend always consulting with knowledgeable people in the local community, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers, Liaison Officers or Community Engagement Workers, before using this toolkit to ensure it is relevant and culturally appropriate.

Remember that much of the information in the presentations is considered Women's Business and is regarded as sensitive and private to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. It should not be shared with or made available to men.

The presentations can be used in group sessions and one-on-one consultations. You may choose to deliver the full presentation, or just a few slides, depending on the type of session and the needs of the audience. The time required to deliver a presentation depends on the topic and the needs of the audience. Allow around 30 minutes to deliver *Periods and the menstrual cycle* and around 45 minutes to deliver *Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)*. When delivering the presentations in a group setting, a private space should be provided for the participants to attend. If you are using an iPad or tablet to deliver the presentation, we recommend printing the facilitator notes to refer to.

Further information

You can view and download additional resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls from www.jeanhailes.org.au/resources/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-resources

For example:

- brochures on periods and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)
- animations on periods, what's PCOS, and how to stay healthy with PCOS.

Useful websites

Australian Guide to Healthy Eating
<https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/guidelines/australian-guide-healthy-eating>

Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet
www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au

Baker Heart & Diabetes Institute – Portion Plate Guide
www.baker.edu.au/health-hub/fact-sheets/the-portion-guide

Jean Hailes for Women's Health
www.jeanhailes.org.au

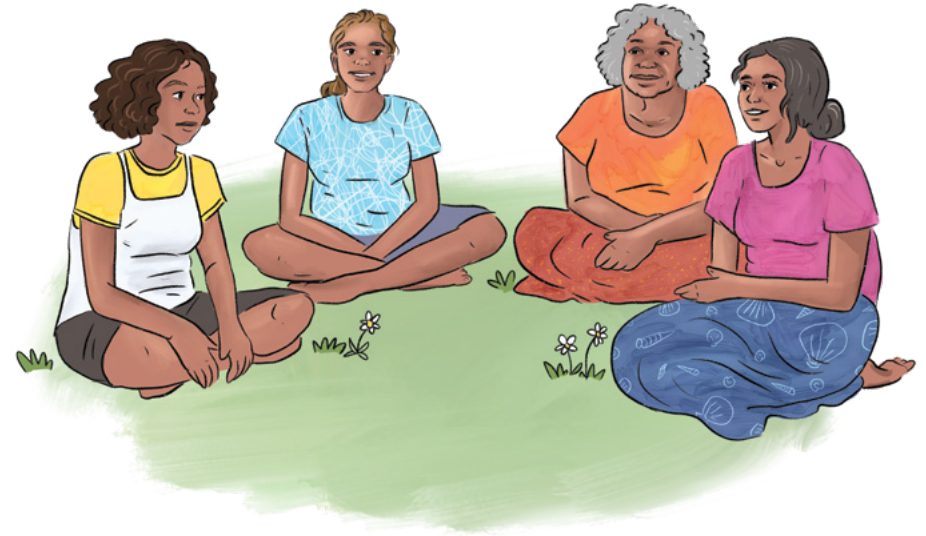
Central Australian Aboriginal Congress
www.caac.org.au

About the artwork



The cover artwork is **Arelhe Areye** by Amunda Gorey. “This image is to represent different types of ladies who develop PCOS and they’re all different, for some it’s genetics and for some it’s lifestyle.”

Amunda Gorey is an Arrernte artist who grew up in the remote community of Santa Teresa, an hour south-east of Alice Springs.



Illustrations by Coolamon Creative.

Coolamon Creative is a 100% Aboriginal owned and operated creative services agency operating out of Darwin and Alice Springs.

What's polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)?

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is a condition that affects women.

PCOS means your period:

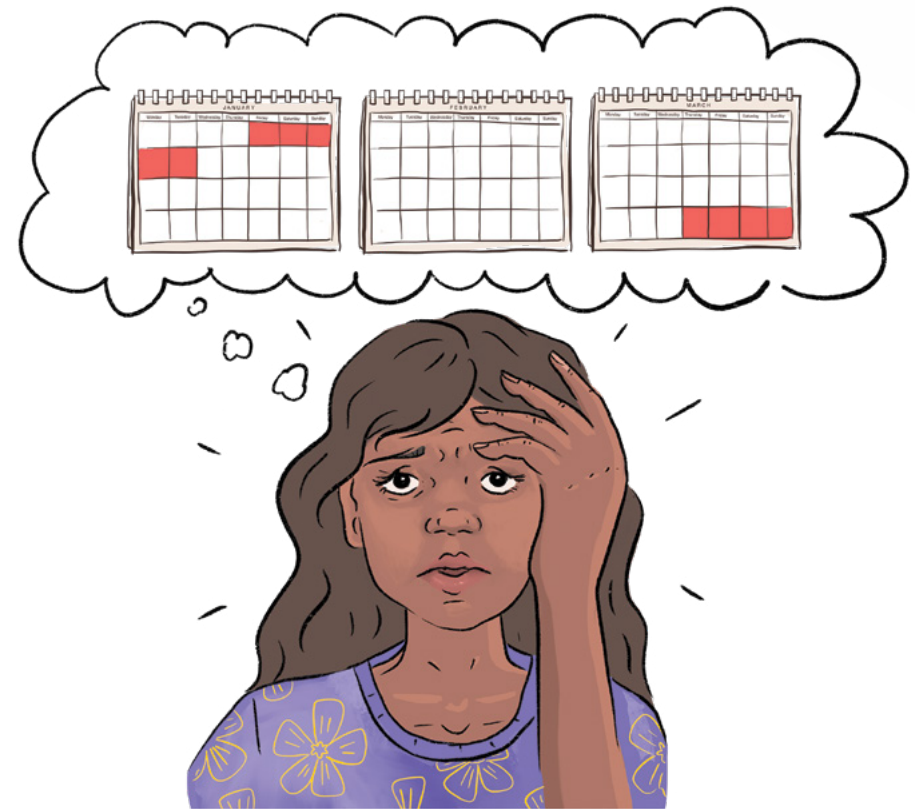
- doesn't come every month
- doesn't come at the same time every month,
or
- doesn't come at all.

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How common is PCOS?

PCOS is common.

Up to 1 in 5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls have PCOS.

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What causes PCOS?

PCOS is caused by a combination of hormones, family history, weight, and lifestyle factors such as diet and exercise.

Hormones

Hormones are chemicals made in different parts of the body, including the brain and the ovaries. They send messages through the bloodstream to tissues and organs.

They help control many of the body's functions, such as temperature, growth, energy, repair of cells, reproduction, sexual function and digestion.

Hormones tell the body to eat, stop eating, sleep, wake up, grow or stop growing.

PCOS and hormones

Women with PCOS have higher levels of two types of hormones:

- **Insulin:** the hormone that lets sugar from the food you eat into your body's cells to be used for energy.
- **Androgens:** 'male-type' hormones that are responsible for lots of things, including hair growth and acne.

PCOS and insulin resistance

Insulin resistance means that the insulin in your body doesn't work properly, so to try and help, the body produces more insulin.

Many women with PCOS have insulin resistance.

High levels of insulin in the body cause the ovaries to work differently. The ovaries start to produce higher levels of androgens (male-type hormones). This causes many of the symptoms of PCOS.

Family history

Women with PCOS are more likely to have a mother, aunt, sister or daughter who also has PCOS.

Type 2 diabetes is also common in the families of women with PCOS.

Weight and lifestyle factors such as diet and exercise

Being overweight, eating an unhealthy diet and not exercising enough can make PCOS symptoms worse.

What causes PCOS?

- Hormones
- Family history
- Weight
- Diet and exercise



PCOS symptoms

If you have PCOS, you might notice things like:

- skin problems like pimples
- hair that grows on your face, back or tummy.

PCOS symptoms

If you have PCOS, you might notice things like:

- pimples
- hair that grows on your face, back or tummy.



PCOS symptoms (continued)

If you have PCOS, you might also notice things like:

- loss of hair on your head
- weight gain and difficulty losing weight.

PCOS symptoms

If you have PCOS, you might notice things like:

- loss of hair on your head
- easy weight gain.



PCOS symptoms (continued)

If you have PCOS, you might also notice things like:

- feeling sad, unhappy, worried or nervous
- trouble getting pregnant.

PCOS symptoms

If you have PCOS, you might notice things like:

- feeling sad and worried
- trouble getting pregnant.



How do you know if you have PCOS?

If you have symptoms, talk to your health carer. They will:

- ask how often you get your period. It is a good idea to keep track of your period using a diary, calendar or smartphone app so that you have this information ready for your health carer.
- ask about your symptoms like pimples or extra hair on your face or back,
or
- take a blood test to check your hormones.

Your health carer might be a doctor, nurse or health worker.

How do you know if you have PCOS?

If you have symptoms, talk to your health carer. They will:

- ask how often you get your period
- ask about your symptoms like pimples or extra hair on your face or back
- do a blood test to check your hormones.

Your health carer might be a doctor, nurse or health worker.



How do you know if you have PCOS? (continued)

A doctor might also check your ovaries using a machine called an ultrasound.

To check for PCOS, it is best to have an internal ultrasound. This means the ultrasound device goes inside your vagina to look at your ovaries.

Your doctor can tell you more about this.

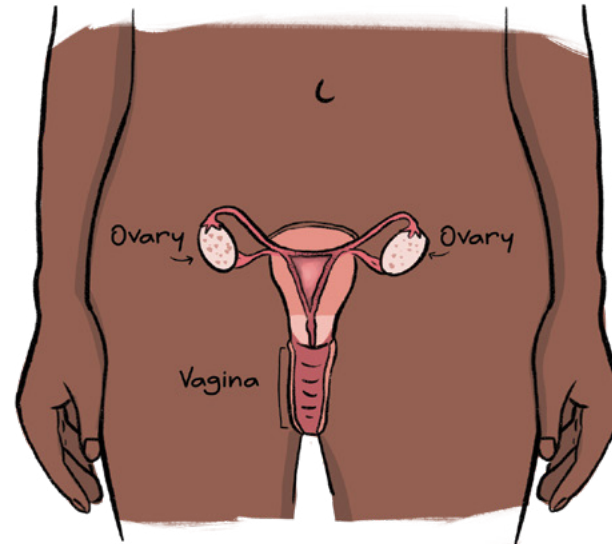
Tell your doctor if you don't want to have an internal ultrasound.

If you have PCOS, the ultrasound might show:

- more than 25 little sacs of fluid (follicles) containing partly developed eggs on your ovaries
- one or both ovaries bigger than they should be (enlarged).

How do you know if you have PCOS?

A doctor might also check your ovaries using a machine called an ultrasound.



PCOS can lead to other health issues

Diabetes

PCOS can increase your risk of developing type 2 diabetes and diabetes during pregnancy.

Diabetes means you have too much sugar in your blood.

High blood pressure

PCOS can increase your risk of developing high blood pressure.

High blood pressure means that your blood pumps through your body with too much force.

High blood pressure is bad for your heart.

High cholesterol

PCOS can increase your risk of developing high cholesterol.

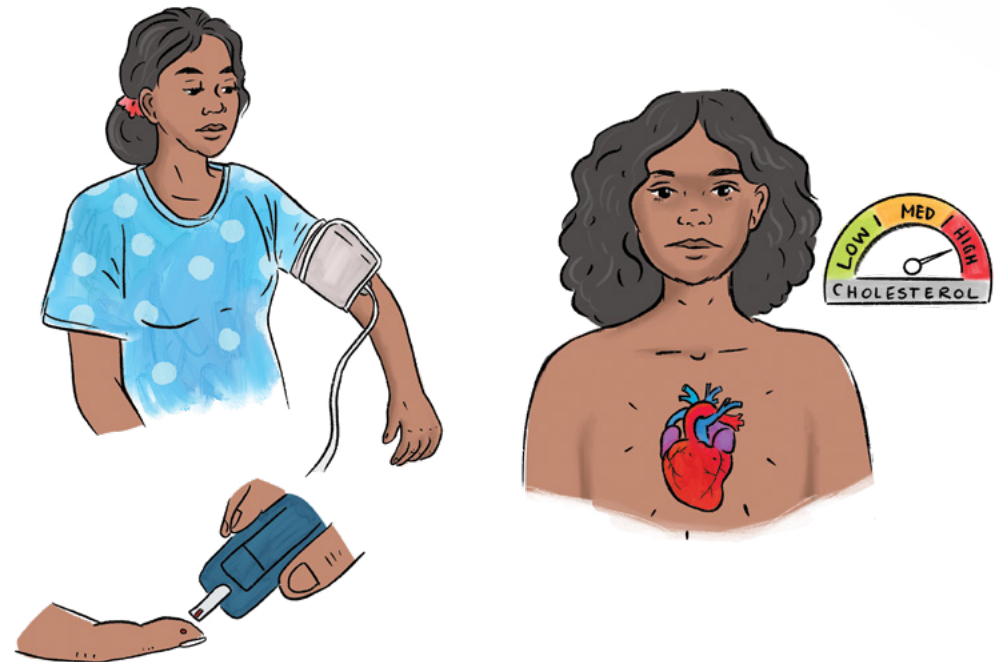
High cholesterol means you have too much fat in your blood.

High cholesterol is bad for your heart.

PCOS can lead to other health issues

PCOS can impact your health and lead to serious health conditions. You might get:

- diabetes
- high blood pressure
- high cholesterol.



Looking after yourself

PCOS cannot be cured, but if you live a healthy life you can:

- improve your symptoms
- reduce your risk of getting other health issues.

Living a healthy life means:

- healthy diet
- physical activity
- losing some weight if you need to
- taking medicine if you need to.

Possible questions for discussion:

- *What does a healthy diet mean to you?*
- *How do we find balance in the way we eat?*
- *What are some nutritious foods you know of?*
- *How can we build more physical activity into our lives?*

Looking after yourself

If you live a healthy life you can:

- improve your symptoms
- reduce your risk of getting other health issues.



Managing PCOS – healthy diet

Eating a healthy diet is important if you have PCOS.

To eat a healthy diet, eat foods from the five food groups every day. The diagram shows foods from each of the five food groups.

Food group 1: Grains

4–6 serves every day

1 serve of grains is equal to 1 slice of bread or half a cup of cooked rice, pasta, noodles or quinoa.

Choose whole grains. For example, wholemeal bread instead of white bread.

Food group 2: Vegetables

5 serves every day

1 serve of vegetables is equal to half a cup of cooked vegetables or 1 cup of salad.

Frozen or tinned vegetables are also cheap and nutritious options.

Food group 3: Fruit

2 serves every day

1 serve of fruit is equal to 1 medium apple, banana, orange or pear, or 1 cup of tinned fruit with no added sugar.

Dried fruit, frozen fruit and tinned fruits are all good options.

Food group 4: Dairy and dairy alternatives

3 serves every day

1 serve of dairy is equal to 1 cup of milk, 2 slices of hard cheese, or 1 small tub of yoghurt.

Food group 5: Meat and other protein

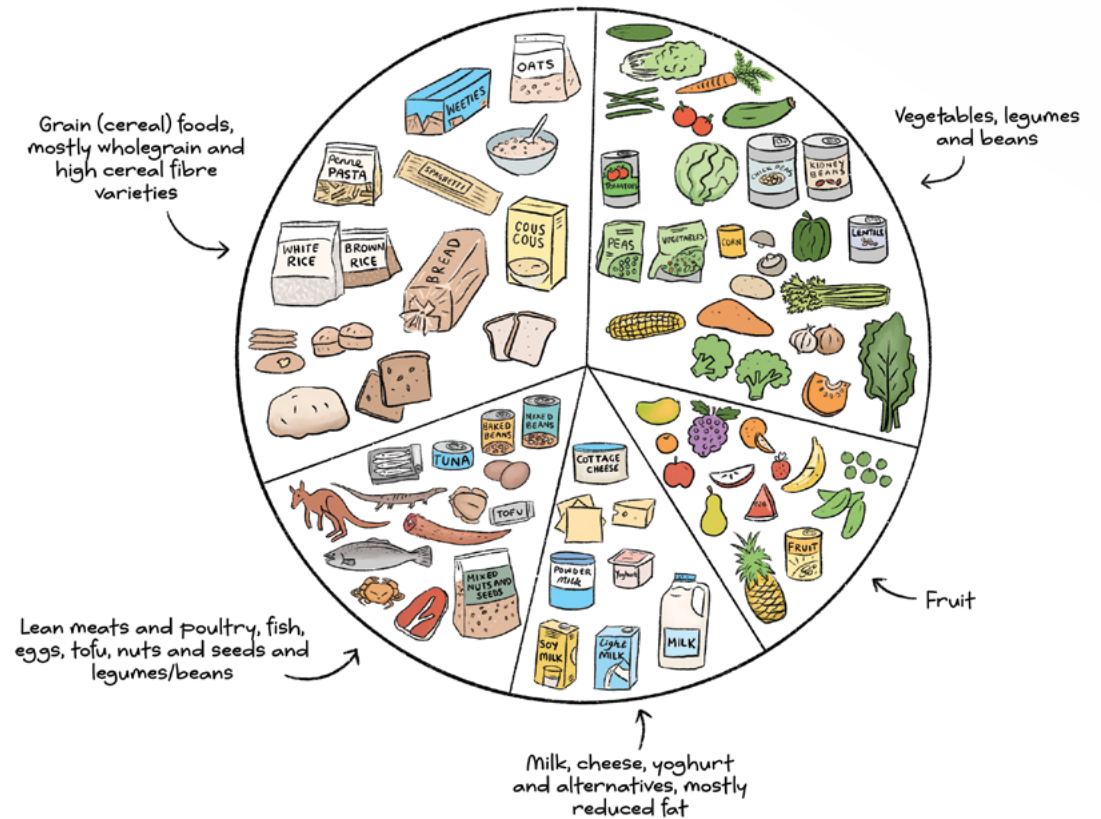
2–3 serves every day

1 serve of protein is equal to 65g of cooked lean red meat, such as beef, lamb or kangaroo (about the size of the palm of your hand), one small can of fish, or 2 large eggs.

For more information about serving sizes go to www.eatforhealth.gov.au/food-essentials/five-food-groups

Healthy diet

Eat foods from the 5 food groups every day.



Based on material provided by the National Health and Medical Research Council

Managing PCOS – healthy diet (continued)

Eat regular meals and snacks when you feel hungry.

Eat less and stop eating when you feel full.

Healthy foods are better at making you feel full as they have protein and fibre.

Drink mostly water, or other low-sugar or sugar-free drinks like:

- diet soft drink
- kombucha
- flavoured sparkling water
- diet cordial.

Avoid sugary drinks like soft drink and flavoured milk.

Healthy diet

- Eat regular meals and snacks when you feel hungry.
- Eat less and stop eating when you feel full.
- Drink more water and less sugary drinks.



Managing PCOS – healthy diet (continued)

Include healthy fats in your diet.

Healthy fats are important for lots of things like maintaining good cholesterol and heart health.

Healthy fats include:

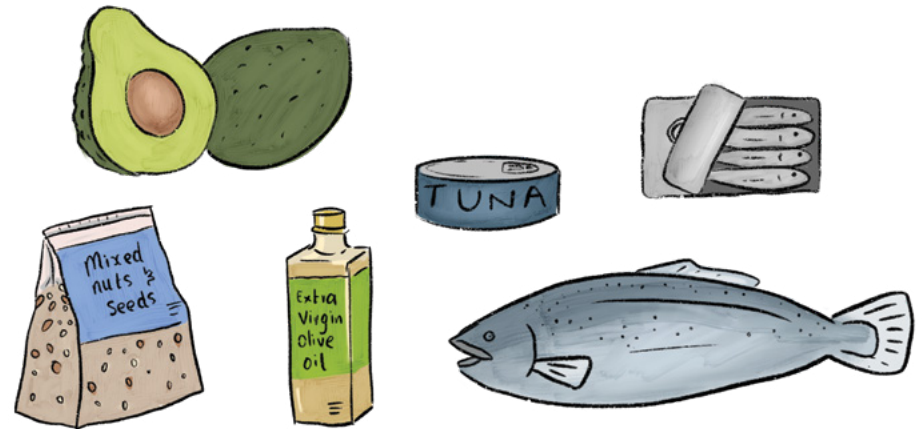
- fatty fish like salmon, tuna and sardines
- nuts and seeds
- avocado
- extra virgin olive oil.

Healthy diet

Include healthy fats in your diet.

For example:

- fatty fish like salmon, tuna and sardines
- nuts and seeds
- avocado
- extra virgin olive oil.



Managing PCOS – healthy diet (continued)

A healthy meal should be half vegetables, with some protein and some grains or other starchy foods (carbohydrates) like pasta or sweet potato.

To make a healthy meal:

1. fill half your plate with vegetables
2. add some protein – for example, meat, eggs, fish, tofu or legumes like chickpeas or lentils
3. add some grains or other starchy foods – for example, rice, noodles, quinoa, pasta, potato, sweet potato or bread
4. eat fruit or dairy as a snack or for dessert.

Healthy diet

A healthy meal should be half vegetables, with some protein and some grains.

Grilled chicken, beans and salad



Meat and vegetables



Kangaroo tail and roast vegetables



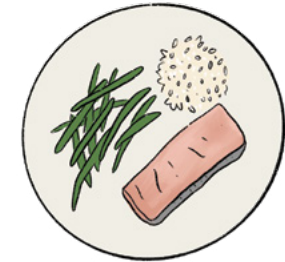
Drumstick with rice and salad



Chicken salad



Salmon, rice and beans



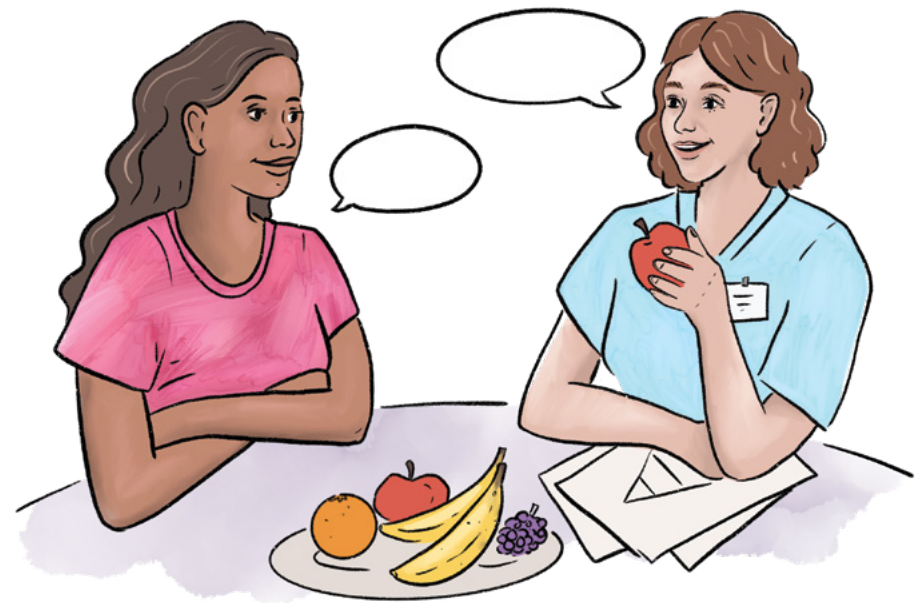
Managing PCOS – healthy diet (continued)

A dietitian is a health professional who can help you learn more about healthy eating.

Your health carer can refer you to a dietitian.

Healthy diet

- A dietitian can help you learn more about healthy eating.
- Your health carer can refer you to a dietitian.



Managing PCOS – physical activity

Physical activity means moving your body.

Regular physical activity can help to reduce your PCOS symptoms.

It can also reduce your risk of having other health issues.

Find ways to build movement and exercise into your daily life.

Physical activity includes moving at home.

For example:

- gardening
- housework
- playing with your children if you have them
- walking to the shops instead of driving.

It also includes moving out bush.

For example:

- hunting
- collecting bush tucker.

Physical activity also includes moving at work.

For example:

- walking to work instead of driving
- lifting or walking as a part of your job.

It also includes moving through sport and exercise.

For example:

- football
- netball
- basketball
- yoga
- jogging
- dancing
- hiking.

Physical activity

If you have PCOS it's important to move your body every day.

For example:

- go for a walk
- do some gardening
- collect bush tucker
- dance
- play football.



Managing PCOS – physical activity (continued)

If you have PCOS:

- move your body for at least 30 minutes every day.
You can break this up into 3 blocks of ten minutes.
- ask your health carer if you need to do more physical activity to stay healthy.

Exercise recommendations

Facilitator note: you may wish to present the relevant information only.

What activity should you do?

Try to do a mixture of ‘moderate’ activity where you feel puffed but you can still have a conversation, and ‘vigorous’ activity where you feel puffed and can’t have a conversation.

To stay a healthy weight

Adults should do:

- 150 minutes (2.5 hours) of moderate physical activity OR 75 minutes of vigorous physical activity per week
- muscle-strengthening activities on 2 non-consecutive days.

Adolescents should do:

- 1 hour of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day
- muscle- and bone-strengthening activities at least 3 times per week.

To lose some weight

Do at least 250 minutes (4 hours) of moderate-intensity physical activity per week OR 150 minutes (2.5 hours) of vigorous physical activity per week.

Include muscle-strengthening activity on 2 non-consecutive days and 90 minutes (1.5 hours) of aerobic activity each week.

Physical activity

If you have PCOS:

- move your body for at least 30 minutes every day
- ask your health carer if you need to do more physical activity to stay healthy.



Managing PCOS – healthy weight

If you have PCOS, it's important to be a healthy weight.

Your health carer can tell you:

- if you are a healthy weight
- if you need to lose some weight.

If you are overweight, losing 5–10% of your body weight can help to improve symptoms of PCOS. For example, losing weight can help make your period come every month and help reduce pimples and hair on your face and back.

For example, if you weigh 80kg, losing 4–8kg will improve your symptoms.

Healthy weight

If you have PCOS, it's important to be a healthy weight. Your health carer can tell you:

- if you are a healthy weight
- if you need to lose some weight.



Managing PCOS – medicine

Some people with PCOS will also need medicine to stay healthy.

Medicine used to treat PCOS can include:

- medicine to help balance your hormones
- medicine to help you lose weight
- medicine to help with your mental and emotional health, such as antidepressants or anti-anxiety medicine
- medicine to help with pimples.

Your health carer might ask you to take medicine for your PCOS.

Medicine

- Some people with PCOS will also need medicine to stay healthy.
- Your health carer might ask you to take medicine for your PCOS.



Other ways to manage PCOS: pimples and hair growth

You can manage your PCOS symptoms in different ways. For example:

- you can pluck, wax, shave or use creams to get rid of hair on your face and back. Laser therapy and electrolysis can be effective long-term treatments for extra hair growth, however they are more expensive up front.
- you can use creams or medicines for pimples and hair growth.

Ask your health carer about medicines that can help with excess hair growth and pimples.

Pimples and hair growth

You can manage your PCOS symptoms in different ways.

For example:

- you can pluck, wax or shave hair on your face and back
- you can use creams or medicines for pimples and hair growth.



Other ways to manage PCOS: having a baby

If you have PCOS and want to have a baby, plan to have a baby before you are 35 years old if possible.

If you are having trouble getting pregnant, talk to your health carer.

Most women with PCOS will be able to have a baby, but it might take longer and you might need help from:

- a doctor who specialises in fertility (helping people get pregnant)
- medicine
- medical procedures.

Having a baby

If you have PCOS and want to have a baby:

- plan to get pregnant before you turn 35 years old
- talk to your health carer if you have trouble getting pregnant.



Other ways to manage PCOS: feeling sad

PCOS can make you feel sad, unhappy, worried or nervous.

If you often feel like this, talking about your feelings can help.

There are lots of people you can talk to. For example:

- friends, family, people in your community, Elders
- your health carer
- people with special training in social and emotional wellbeing, such as a counsellor, social worker or psychologist.

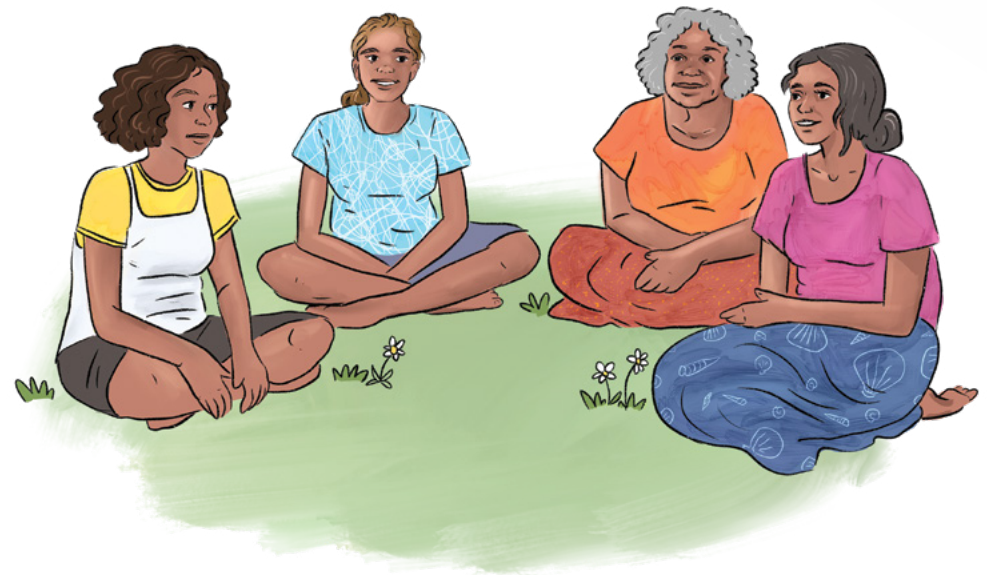
Your health carer can refer you to a counsellor.

Feeling sad

PCOS can make you feel sad, unhappy, worried or nervous.

If you feel like this, talking can help. Talk to:

- friends, family, Elders
- your health carer
- a counsellor or psychologist.



Remember

1. PCOS means your period:
 - doesn't come every month
 - doesn't come at the same time every month, or
 - doesn't come at all.
2. A healthy lifestyle is the best way to improve your PCOS symptoms.
3. Talk to your health carer if you think you might have PCOS.



For further information contact

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Disclaimer: This information does not replace medical advice. If a person is worried about their health, they should talk to their doctor or healthcare team.

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