

# Don't ignore warning signs

**HEALTH WATCH** One in five Mumbai women has polycystic ovarian syndrome – double the global average

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**MUMBAI:** Three years ago, Shweta Lakhani, 25, (name changed) began to show signs of that pesky adolescent agony — acne. Her hair started falling, which she attributed to her thyroid problem.

But the acne refused to fade, despite medical creams and stabilising thyroid levels. After several futile visits to doctors and dermatologists, Lakhani finally approached a gynaecologist.

That's when she was told she had polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) — a condition where small follicles or cysts develop on the ovaries, leading to irregular menses, weight gain, hirsutism (excessive facial and body hair), acne, hairfall and eventually, in some cases, infertility.

Incidentally, five of Lakhani's friends, all below the age of 25, also have PCOS. Once a disorder afflicting mostly middle-aged and menopausal women, PCOS is now a disease of the young. The reasons — high stress and poor lifestyle choices — are characteristic of a generation on the fast track.

Internationally, one in 10 women suffers from PCOS. In India, experts estimate it to be one in five. And swapping personal PCOS stories has become as common as sharing gossip amongst 20-somethings today.

Financial consultant Dia Kochar (25), who was diagnosed with PCOS three years ago, as were four of her friends, says: "When I'm talking to girls my age about our health, the talk invariably turns to PCOS and we're like 'Oh, you have PCOS too? Join the club!'"

There is, in fact, an actual PCOS club in Mumbai now.

Gynaecworld, a Mumbai-based women's health speciality centre, opened the country's first PCOS club in January.

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"The young girls diagnosed with PCOS are usually frightened out of their wits," says Gynaecworld chairman Dr Duru Shah. "Either they don't know what it is, or they are misinformed. I started the club to educate them and create awareness."

Word of mouth is helping too as youngsters discuss symptoms, urge others to be tested and share tips on living with the syndrome.

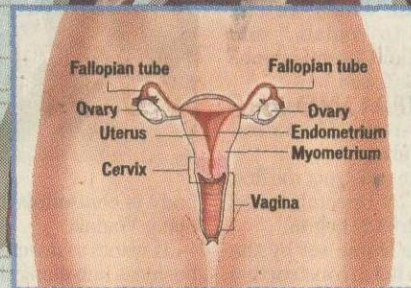
"If any of my friends show PCOS symptoms, I push them to visit a gynecologist at once," says Lakhani, who admits her irregular sleeping and eating habits probably brought on the disorder. "I also nag them to take better care of themselves."

## WHAT IS PCOS?

- Every month, a healthy ovary produces a single egg or ovum and, when it is mature, releases it from its tiny follicle or sac. If left unfertilised, the ovum is purged from the body through the menstrual cycle.
- A polycystic ovary produces many more ova than a healthy ovary (often over 12 a month), and most fail to mature.
- The few that do mature are released, and purged through menstrual cycles that are therefore erratic.
- Those that do not mature remain in their sacs, which accumulate as cysts in the ovary — thus the term polycystic ovaries.
- These accumulating cysts lead to hormonal changes, raising testosterone levels. This is the main cause of some of the more visible symptoms, like male pattern facial hair and acne. Accumulating cysts can also, over the years, cause infertility.

## Symptoms of PCO

1. Thinning of scalp hair and excessive hair loss
2. Acne
3. Hirsutism (excessive male pattern hair growth on the face and body)
4. Difficulty in conceiving
5. Absent or irregular periods
6. Sudden weight gain



## Causes of PCO

While the cause of PCOS is not known, genes are believed to be a key factor. PCOS is therefore more common among women with a family history of the disease; it is also common in women with high insulin levels or insulin-resistance.

Medical experts say the reason for the growing prevalence of PCOS is because women with a greater chance of developing the disease are unknowingly helping to trigger it.

The key triggers are lifestyle issues going unnoticed by young women — factors like inactivity, high stress levels, an unhealthy diet and irregular eating and sleeping hours.

If you think you have PCOS, consult a gynaecologist. Though there is no known cure, the disease can be managed, and many of the symptoms alleviated with medication and lifestyle changes.

## JOIN THE CLUB

- If you have PCOS, you can join Gynaecworld's PCOS Club by calling 23803965 or 23802584. Check out gynaecworld.com for more information.
- Members of the PCOS Club get discounts on skin care, laser therapy, gym memberships, consultations with dieticians and gynaecological tests, in addition to counselling, monthly seminars and advice on controlling and monitoring the disease.

## High stress, junk food key triggers

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**MUMBAI:** On a daily basis, Dr Sejal Desai, consulting gynecologist at Asha Parekh Hospital, sees two to three PCOS patients below the age of 25, many of them 15 and 16 years old, and some as young as 13.

"High-stress levels, too much junk food, poor sleeping habits and lack of exercise trigger the condition in adolescent girls," says Desai. Academic stress is a key trigger too, says Dr Kiran Coelho, consulting gynaecologist at the Lilavati and Holy Family Hospitals. "Thanks to the intense academic competition and peer pressure to perform, young girls are always studying and have no time for sports. This inactivity leads to obesity, which in turn exacerbates PCOS."

That's also where the junk food comes in, with stress eating and unhealthy diets further contributing to obesity.

Gynaecworld chairman, Dr Duru Shah, estimates that 80 per cent of PCOS cases are linked to excess weight. While gynaecologists agree that the number of young women diagnosed has risen steadily over the past five years, they say detection of the disorder has also increased significantly.

"Most young women aren't concerned by irregular periods, unless they bleed heavily," says Dr Shah. "But they are concerned about their body image. Dermatologists are now well aware of the prevalence of PCOS and usually refer such patients to gynaecologists."

Though there is no known

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Gynaecworld chairman

cure, the syndrome can be controlled and symptoms alleviated. After taking a contraceptive pill under medical supervision, and learning to eat healthier and more regularly and sleep more regular hours, Shweta Lakhani, a 25-year-old patient, says her acne improved and her hair stopped falling. She is now trying homeopathy, as she is concerned about the pill's long-term effects on fertility.

Concerns over fertility plague many young PCOS patients. Some, such as Karishma Dalal, are even planning to get married earlier to avoid complications. "PCOS patients find it hard to conceive after 30," says the 27-year-old hairstylist who was detected with PCOS in Class 10. "They have to take hormonal injections and tablets which can lead to the conceiving of twins."

Dalal speaks from experience — she is one of twins, conceived after booster shots by her mother, a PCOS patient. "Those with PCOS in the family should be extra careful. Studies suggest that it may be hereditary," says Dr Shah.

"Though there is no known cure, you can keep it under control. Fifty per cent of the problem will be solved by losing and maintaining weight."

Dr Coelho recommends a careful diet plan, and yoga to de-stress. The best cure, of course, is prevention, she adds.

Illustration: RICHA/HT GRAPHIC