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Dr Lim Lei Jun
Fertility Specialist

From Empty Arms to Motherhood

Women with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) often have a hard time conceiving naturally. Motherhood is not an impossible dream for them, however, as there are ways to help them conceive.

Words: Lim Teck Choon

UNDERSTANDING PCOS

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is one of the most common causes of infertility in women all over the world. A woman with PCOS will have ovaries which contain many tiny immature follicles (which are sacs containing eggs) that resemble cysts. These follicles resemble strands of pearls in an ultrasound image.

Hormonal Imbalances

Dr Lim Lei Jun explains that PCOS is actually a condition in which a woman's hormones go out of balance. We still have yet to fully understand the cause of this imbalance, but we know that it can end up causing issues that can affect the woman's life in many areas.

For example, the ovaries normally produce only a small amount of male sex hormones or androgens. The ovaries of a woman with PCOS end up producing far more androgens than normal, however,

causing problems such as:

- Irregular periods or irregular release of mature eggs from the ovaries. This affects her ability to conceive.
- Growth of extra facial or body hair and increased frequency of acne.
- Over time, her body may begin experiencing insulin resistance. As a result, she develops type 2 diabetes. Type 2 diabetes can also give rise to various associated health conditions such as kidney problems, high cholesterol levels, heart problems and more.
- The hormonal imbalance can also affect her mental health, making her more prone to depression.

Dr Lim adds that while two thirds of women with PCOS are overweight or obese, there are also women with normal weight or even who are underweight who can also have PCOS. Among the latter group, their condition is called 'thin PCOS'.

Balancing the Imbalances

Lifestyle modification is essential to manage PCOS, as this condition cannot be cured. "The key is weight management," says Dr Lim. Given that many women with PCOS are overweight, it is important to lose the extra kilos and maintain a healthy body weight. Weight loss of 10-15% is sufficient for most women to experience a more regular period.

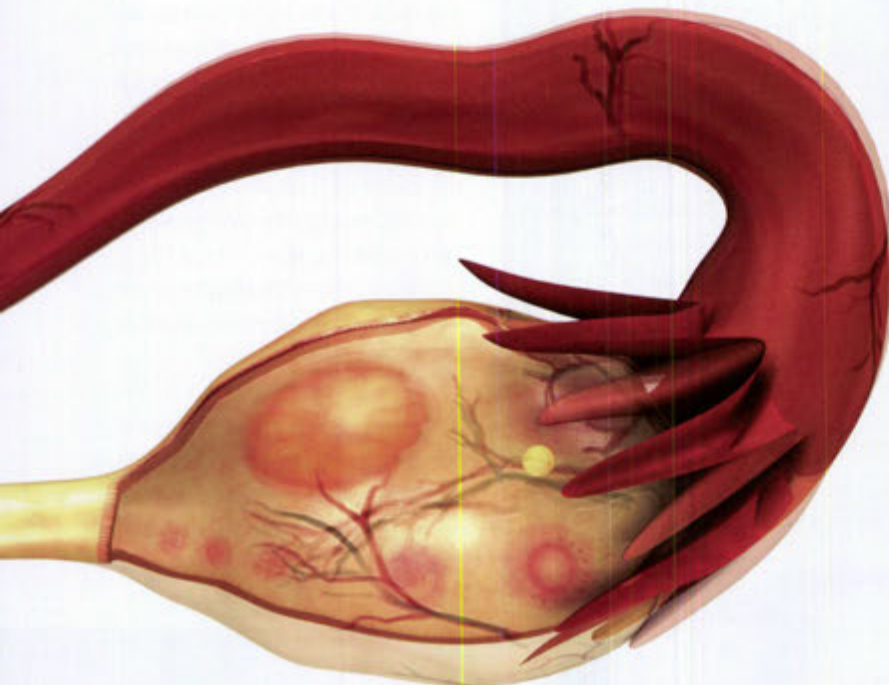
There are two important aspects of lifestyle modification that need to be put into practice:

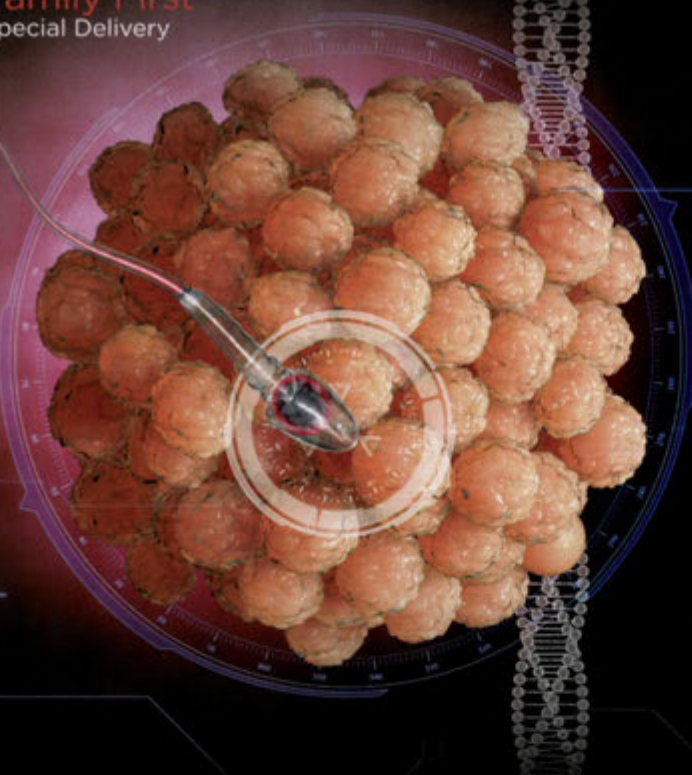
1. Healthy, balanced diet.

Generally, eat foods from all food groups in recommended portions. A dietitian can offer advice on this matter. One can improve the nutritional content of her daily diet by choosing healthier options. For example, whole grains instead of processed grains for higher dietary fibre and nutrient; low-fat or fat-free dairy products to reduce fat intake; steam, stir fry, grill or bake instead of deep frying.

2. Stay physically active for at least 30 minutes, every day.

There are a variety of moderate and vigorous activities such as brisk walking, cycling, jogging and running to help one burn excess calories and lose weight. Other activities to consider include joining the gym, taking up dancing or participating in group activities such as tai-chi and nature hikes.





Additionally, Dr Lim recommends quitting unhealthy habits such as smoking, which can further cause hormonal imbalance in the body. Birth control pills may also be prescribed as a means to reduce the PCOS symptoms that are caused by high levels of androgens as well as to regulate the menstrual cycle.

THE JOURNEY TO MOTHERHOOD

While birth control pills can help regulate periods, they are not an option for women with PCOS who also wish to conceive. This is because birth control pills do not address the underlying problems that cause infertility, and stopping birth control pills will only cause their cycles to become irregular again.

There are options, fortunately. When a woman with PCOS wishes to try to have a child, a fertility specialist can help.

Taking the First Step, to a Fertility Centre

"The inability to conceive a child through natural means is often a complex issue, with no clear cut solution," says Dr Lim. Thus, a fertility specialist will perform a check-up on both partners in the preliminary examination stage. After all, there may be other issues present, aside from PCOS, and these issues will also need to be looked into in order for the couple to have a child successfully.

Helping a Woman Conceive Despite PCOS

If PCOS is the reason for the couple's inability to conceive a child naturally, losing excess weight and undergoing fertility treatments are often considered first. Fertility treatments often include prescription of medications such as clomiphene citrate, which helps to promote ovulation.

Do you have PCOS?

While we have yet to have any study done on the prevalence of PCOS in Malaysia, Dr Lim estimates that about one third of her patients have PCOS. Some have been diagnosed with PCOS, while others suspect that they have this condition.

It is important, stresses Dr Lim, to see a doctor if you suspect that you have PCOS. In addition to the discomfort and stress of having to deal with PCOS symptoms as well as the increased risk of metabolic diseases, there is another cause for concern. Dr Lim says, "If the womb of a woman with PCOS does not bleed at least once every three months, her hormonal imbalance can cause the womb lining to overgrow. When this happens, her risk of developing endometrial or womb cancer increases."

Therefore, see a gynaecologist if you suspect that you have PCOS, or if you experience either prolonged period (with or without heavy flow) or no period for more than 3 months.

Dr Lim explains that there is another procedure that may help: laparoscopic ovarian drilling.

"This solution may work for about two-thirds of women with PCOS," Dr Lim says. "And the beneficial effects can last for up to a year."

However, she cautions that this procedure is not a cure for PCOS – it is merely a step to help the woman to achieve more regular periods and thus more regular release of mature eggs.

Drilling the ovary. The patient will be anaesthetized, and the surgeon will then make a small incision in the abdomen, at the belly button area. Under the guidance of a laparoscope (a thin, lighted tube with a camera), the surgeon would use either a laser fibre or electro-surgical needle to carefully puncture areas of the ovary.

Dr Lim explains that the exact mechanism behind this procedure is still not clearly understood, but the regulated damaging of the ovaries can stimulate the ovaries to eventually produce viable eggs.

The whole procedure takes only about an hour or so, and the patient can resume her regular routines shortly after. As for the ovaries, the damage caused by the procedure will heal.

Who performs this surgery?

Dr Lim explains that most gynaecologists are trained to do this.

Who will get the most out of it?

Dr Lim says that this is not an option for every woman with PCOS; women under 35 with irregular periods and who do not respond well to clomiphene citrate are most likely to gain the most benefit from this procedure.

Are there potential complications?

The procedure has to be carefully performed; otherwise the ovaries may be permanently damaged. There are also typical potential complications related to any surgical procedure, such as bleeding and infection. However, these are generally not common.

"Generally, young women who are not morbidly obese will have minimal risks," Dr Lim concludes.

What happens after the surgery?

The patient is usually discharged on the same day, and will be asked to come back for a follow-up medical assessment a week later.

The beneficial effects of ovarian drilling will usually be seen only about 3 months or so after the procedure. The woman should experience a more regular menstrual cycle without any medication for about a year or so. Assuming that there are no other problems affecting the couple's fertility, there is a good chance that they may be able to have a child naturally during this period.

Dr Lim stresses that even after the procedure, the woman should still control her weight and eat a healthy diet to keep her PCOS under control. Doing so can also help to improve her chances of having a child. **HT**

