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Gaynor Bussell, RD

Author of Managing PCOS For Dummies

Sharon Perkins, RN

Coauthor of Infertility For Dummies



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by Gaynor Bussell and Sharon Perkins, RN



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About the Authors

Gaynor Bussell: Gaynor Bussell is a registered dietitian, a nutrition consultant, and a member of various professional nutrition organizations, including the Nutrition Society and the British Dietetic Association.

Gaynor began specializing in women's health after taking a short career break to have her two daughters. She worked as a women's health dietitian for over six years at University College Hospital in London, specializing particularly in PMS, menopause, preconception health, eating disorders, and, of course, PCOS. She also covered the osteoporosis clinic at this hospital. During this time, Gaynor became dietary advisor to a women's health charity.

Since then, Gaynor has worked at various women's health clinics, including those at Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's. She was also the dietitian for a private residential eating disorders center. Gaynor continues to see private patients who have women's health issues and/or eating disorders. She also continues to work with various women's health organizations and charities, and writes and gives talks on various aspects of women's health.

Gaynor currently works as a consultant for the Food and Drink Federation (FDF), where her role includes acting as the interface on nutritional matters between industry and UK and EU authorities and sitting on a number of decision-making committees.

Sharon Perkins: Sharon Perkins is a registered nurse with over 20 years of experience, mostly in women's health and ophthalmology. She is also an online medical writer and author of seven *For Dummies* books, including *Infertility For Dummies*, *Osteoporosis For Dummies*, *Breastfeeding For Dummies*, *Endometriosis For Dummies*, *Healthy Aging For Dummies*, and *Dad's Guide to Pregnancy For Dummies* (all published by Wiley). She enjoys all her jobs equally but enjoys her three grandchildren, five children, two daughters-in-law, one son-in-law, family, and friends more! She lives in New Jersey but spends a lot of time gallivanting around the country and would live in Walt Disney World if she could.

Dedication

This is dedicated to all the women with PCOS we've gotten to know over the years.

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Layout and Graphics: Corrie Socolovitch
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Introduction

When you're first diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), you may have a million questions about how this disorder will affect your life. No one wants a disease that doesn't have a cure! However, the good news is that you can, with work, keep your PCOS symptoms more or less completely at bay. This doesn't happen simply by taking a pill or two — you have to put in the effort yourself, and you aren't going to see results overnight. That's not a message that everyone likes to hear in today's instant-gratification society. The rewards are huge though — you get your life back, and you feel so much healthier that you don't *want* to return to your old lifestyle.

Put simply, you need to live a healthy life to keep PCOS under control. Lose any excess weight, get fit, tone up, and eat food that's going to give your body the biggest bang for the buck. In some cases, medications can help prevent complications and get your symptoms under control. All this doesn't need to be dull and boring: Not only can being physically active be fun, but it can literally change your life. Eating right gives you more energy for life and can taste surprisingly good, too.

For many women with PCOS, pregnancy is a huge concern. Getting pregnant may not be as easy for you as it is for some women, but this book gives you all the info you need on the help that's out there. If you need fertility treatments, we give you the basic run-down on what to expect.

About This Book

When you're first told that you have a particular medical condition, people come out of the woodwork to tell you third-hand stories about the experiences of friends and long-lost relatives. And, more than likely, everyone's advice contradicts the advice of the last person you talked to. You may have looked up PCOS online or leafed through a few books about it. You may even have read articles about it in popular magazines, or read about some celebrity who cured herself by eating nothing but peanut butter sandwiches. What's a girl to do when faced with the garden of misinformation, half-truths, and dire predictions about PCOS available 24/7 online and elsewhere?

This book gives you down-to-earth and up-to-date advice. It tells you what has worked and what hasn't for PCOS sufferers, and takes you through what you can be doing for yourself to help reduce your PCOS symptoms, as well as what medical treatments are available for PCOS. Being able to discuss your medical condition knowledgeably with your doctor helps you to be a proactive patient.

And it does all this as a reference book — not something you have to read from beginning to end, but something you can dip into to find the information you need when you need it.

Conventions Used in This Book

We use the following conventions throughout this book to help keep things consistent and easy to understand:

- ✔ When we introduce a new term, we put it in *italics* and define it shortly thereafter, often in parentheses.
- ✔ All web addresses appear in monospace. **Note:** When this book was printed, some web addresses may have needed to break across two lines of text. If that happened, rest assured that we haven't put in any extra characters (such as hyphens) to indicate the break. So, when using one of these web addresses, just type in exactly what you see in this book, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist.

What You're Not to Read

If you want to get straight to the nitty-gritty, and extract all the vital bits as quickly as possible so you can make a start on what you need to do, you can skip the following information and still accomplish your goal:

- ✔ **Text in sidebars:** These gray boxes appear here and there throughout the book. They share anecdotes and observations, but they aren't essential reading.
- ✔ **Anything marked by a Technical Stuff icon:** This information pumps you with a few more technical facts or background about a particular subject, but it isn't essential reading if you don't want to know the why, just the how.

Of course, when you're ready (and have the time or curiosity to spare), remember that these pieces of info are well worth dipping into.

Foolish Assumptions

Every *For Dummies* book is written with a particular reader in mind, and this one is no exception. So, I made the following basic assumptions about you:

- ✔ You're not a doctor, so you don't have (or want) the technical understanding about the PCOS condition, but you are interested in getting a basic understanding of it.
- ✔ You have PCOS, and you want to know how to reduce your symptoms so that you can improve your quality of life.
- ✔ You're confused about the right dietary and exercise route to take to get you on track to reducing your symptoms.
- ✔ You're dissatisfied with quick fixes, fads, and wonder diets and treatments and need a realistic alternative that works.
- ✔ You want straight-talking, understandable information. You want to learn about possible complications and issues that women with PCOS face so you can deal with them intelligently, but you don't need to become an expert on PCOS.
- ✔ You want to get pregnant and have heard that pregnancy is difficult for women with PCOS. Rest assured, we address your pregnancy concerns in detail.
- ✔ You don't want to spend hours digging around for information, but you do want a one-stop shop that cuts to the chase but doesn't mislead you.

How This Book Is Organized

The great thing about *For Dummies* books is that you don't have to read them all the way through. You can simply turn to the bit you want — a chapter, a section, even just a paragraph. The table of contents and the index help you out. This section gives you an idea of what lies ahead.

Part I: PCOS in a Nutshell

When you're initially diagnosed with any condition, the first order of business is getting a good enough understanding so that (1) you're not terrified or panicky and (2) you can make good decisions about how to take care of your health. So, in this part, we give you basic information about PCOS: what it is, what causes it, what symptoms may accompany it, what changes you can expect as you age, and — most important — how you can take control and manage it.

Part II: Taking Control of Your Symptoms

In this part, we talk about the underlying causes of PCOS so you know what you're dealing with. Then it's time to discuss all the nitty-gritty topics of everyday life — diet, exercise, medications, supplements, and keeping your mind and body balanced so you don't go over the edge dealing with it all.

Part III: Menstrual Cycles, Fertility, and Pregnancy

PCOS can really turn your hormonal life upside down, and your menstrual cycle and fertility can take a beating in the process. This part shows you how to turn your menstrual cycle right-side up again and discusses fertility issues that can loom large when you have PCOS. Last, we look at the effects of PCOS on pregnancy and give you tips on how to get pregnant, with or without medical help, and how to deliver a healthy baby at the end of it all.

Part IV: The Part of Tens

This part contains four chapters of ten tips each, which form a quick reference guide. Most of these tips are mentioned throughout the rest of the book, but this part brings them all together as a handy reference.

Here you find tips on the PCOS symptoms that you can diminish by using the advice in this book; discover how to distinguish the good diets from the bad; and identify ten superfoods you can incorporate into your diet to help reduce your PCOS symptoms. Finally, the last chapter lists ten sources of support and advice for people who have PCOS or have a close friend or relative with it.

Icons Used in This Book

Icons are a handy *For Dummies* way to catch your attention as you slide your eyes down the page. The icons come in several varieties, each with its own unique symbol and meaning.



Your understanding of the health and diet world may be riddled with myths or old wives' tales. Some of them may be based on truth, but most came from another planet and don't apply to human beings today. This symbol means that the myth has been exposed for what it is.



This symbol marks the place where you can find explanations of the terms used by nutrition experts.



This icon draws your attention to an important point to keep in mind when dealing with PCOS.



These details add to your understanding of PCOS. You can get on in life perfectly fine without them, so skip them if you want to, but try a few first — they may give you some facts that may help you to answer the questions on obscure quiz shows!



The Tip icon does exactly what it says — cherish these little nuggets because they're there to make your life a little easier.



This icon points to certain pitfalls or things that may actually harm you. Ignore at your peril!

Where to Go from Here

Where to go from here? Wherever you like, and you certainly don't need to read from cover to cover, unless you like to follow tradition! You can dive right in anywhere in the book, because each chapter (and even each section) delivers a complete message. The table of contents is detailed enough to help you pinpoint the topic you want to know about.

If you want to know more about exercising to achieve weight loss, go straight to Chapter 6. If pregnancy is foremost on your mind, jump in at Chapter 11. If you're really not sure where to start, read Chapter 1, which gives you all the basic information about PCOS and helps you decide which area you want to home in on first.

Part I

PCOS in a Nutshell

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"It's been two months since your diagnosis, and I know you're reluctant to talk about it. But we've got to start discussing it in some way other than messages left on the refrigerator with these tiny word magnets."

In this part...

This part gives you an overview of everything PCOS related and helps you identify whether you might have PCOS by listing all the symptoms.

In this part, you get some straight facts about your condition, how it plays out in your body, how it changes when you change (such as when you get older or heavier), and how you can start to tackle it.

Chapter 1

Sensible and Straightforward Solutions for a Difficult Condition

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding PCOS and its symptoms
 - ▶ Taking the initial steps when you think you may have PCOS
 - ▶ Tackling PCOS through diet, exercise, and emotional well-being
 - ▶ Looking at treatment options
 - ▶ Working out what you can do to help yourself
-

This chapter is a great place to get on the right course if you suffer or suspect you suffer from PCOS, or if you have a friend, relative, or partner with the condition and you want a quick overview of the most important things you need to know about PCOS.

This chapter gives an overview of the entire book. In one chapter you get a feel for what PCOS really is and what its symptoms are. Just as important, you get an overview of treatments and lifestyle changes that are aimed at reducing the symptoms; many are things that you can do to help yourself.

Understanding PCOS

PCOS is the most common ovarian function disorder in premenopausal women. Yet, until recently, it was one of the least-understood conditions. Research into the causes and symptoms of PCOS has shown it to have consequences more far-reaching than the obvious physical symptoms; the long-term effects extend into menopause and beyond.

Defining the condition

According to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, PCOS is defined as having any two of the following signs and symptoms:

- ✓ *Oligo-ovulation* (irregular ovulation) or *anovulation* (a complete lack of ovulation)
- ✓ Clinical or biochemical signs of high *androgen* (male hormone) levels
- ✓ Polycystic ovaries, which means many small cysts on the ovaries (normal ovaries have five or six follicles, whereas polycystic ovaries have ten or more)



The hormones involved in controlling periods and, ultimately, reproduction, are produced in the pituitary gland, located in the brain. In women with PCOS, two of these hormones — luteinizing hormone (LH) and follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) — are produced in abnormal proportions. The imbalance of these two hormones prevents the follicles in the ovary from developing properly: The follicles tend to remain small and don't mature enough to release an egg. As a result, a string of small follicles, or cysts, form on the ovary, giving rise to the characteristic polycystic ovary that gives the disorder its name.



Polycystic ovaries alone are not enough to diagnose PCOS. If the symptoms of PCOS do develop, that marks the change from simply having symptom-free polycystic ovaries to having PCOS. Around 20 percent of women have polycystic ovaries but no symptoms of PCOS.

PCOS statistics

The rates of PCOS appear to be increasing. Increasing rates of PCOS are most likely to be related to the rise in obesity rates in the United States. Around 68 percent of all adults in the United States are now overweight or obese, and, even more alarming, 20 percent of children ages 6 to 11 and 18 percent of teens are overweight. The potential increase in overweight even in children could herald the development of even more women developing PCOS in the future.

Chew on these PCOS statistics for more on how this disorders affects women of nearly all ages:

- ✓ Around 5 million American women have PCOS.
- ✓ PCOS can start in girls as young as age 11.
- ✓ About 5 percent to 10 percent of American women have PCOS.

It's in the genes

Researchers in the United States studied 215 mothers of women with PCOS and compared them with mothers of women who didn't have PCOS. Results showed that mothers of women with PCOS themselves had some of the symptoms of PCOS, including high cholesterol levels, insulin resistance, and other metabolic abnormalities associated with PCOS.

In addition, a high proportion of these mothers who had daughters with PCOS reported that they had had menstrual irregularities. Those mothers who had reported the menstrual problems had higher male hormone levels than those who hadn't reported irregularities.

All this points to the fact that the mothers of daughters with PCOS had a much higher incidence of PCOS symptoms than mothers of non-PCOS daughters. It seemed that whether the mothers had been diagnosed with PCOS or not, a genetic tendency was definitely present.

Knowing you're at risk

The exact cause of PCOS is unclear, but certain conditions do predispose women to developing it:

- ✔ **Being obese, especially if obesity began before puberty:** Overweight that develop before puberty appears to increase male androgen levels.
- ✔ **Elevated insulin levels:** High insulin levels stimulate increased male hormone production.
- ✔ **Genetics:** You're at increased risk if your mother or sister has the condition or if your father has female family members with PCOS.



Here are the stats showing the genetic tendency toward PCOS (you can read more about the link in the sidebar "It's in the genes"):

- ✔ Thirty-five percent of PCOS sufferers inherit the disorder from their mother.
- ✔ Thirty-five percent of PCOS sufferers inherit the disorder from their father's side of the family.
- ✔ Fifty percent of PCOS sufferers have female relatives with PCOS on both sides of their family.

- ✔ In one study, 77 percent of women with PCOS had a close relative with PCOS; 50 percent had a mother or sister with the disorder and 25 percent had a maternal or paternal aunt with PCOS.

A single gene responsible for PCOS has not been found. Developing PCOS may be a complex issue with genetic, environmental, and lifestyle components, such as early diet.

Identifying the symptoms

The symptoms of PCOS vary from woman to woman and can be present in any combination. They also can change over time, so if you have PCOS, your symptoms are likely to be different from someone else you know with PCOS.

The most common PCOS symptoms include the following:

- ✔ **Weight gain, especially around the tummy:** Turn to Chapter 2 for more on the causes and effects of weight gain in women with PCOS and check out Chapter 5 for help with losing weight.
- ✔ **Increased hairiness on the face and other regions (called *hirsutism*):** Excess *androgens* (male hormones) cause this symptoms. We talk more about the effects and treatments of excess hair where you don't want it in Chapter 2.
- ✔ **Male pattern baldness or thinning hair:** This symptom, another side effect of increased male hormones, is also addressed in more detail in Chapter 2.
- ✔ **Oily skin with acne:** This is another side effect of androgen production. We cover it in greater detail in Chapter 2.
- ✔ **Absent or irregular menstrual cycles:** This condition leads to infertility. The issues of the menstrual cycle are discussed in detail in Chapter 10. Ways to improve fertility are found in Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Insulin resistance:** Being insulin resistant means your body can't use insulin efficiently. This leads to high circulating blood levels of insulin (called *hyperinsulinemia*). High levels of insulin in the blood may cause PCOS symptoms to worsen gradually. Being diagnosed with insulin resistance also increases your chances of having PCOS. See Chapter 3 for an in-depth discussion of insulin resistance and its role in PCOS.