

Week - Health

40 THE WEEK • HEALTH • MAY 31 • 2009

women's health

STR

PCOS || Trimming down can go a long way in the management of this condition

By Purna Uppal

Riya knew that she had a problem at hand when her periods did not stop even after 40 days. The then 17-year-old thought it was the stress of her class 12 board exams wreaking havoc on her system, but a visit to the doctor told her otherwise. She was diagnosed with polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), a condition caused due to the imbalance of hormones produced by ovaries. "The ovaries produce more testosterone and egg production or ovulation becomes irregular," says senior gynaecologist Dr Kaushaki Trivedi of Max Hospital, Gurgaon.

The condition is marked by a number of symptoms: irregular or absent periods, weight gain and abnormal growth of hair. A marked feature of this syndrome is sub-fertility. "While some women can conceive without aid, some may require medication and in cases where infertility has set in, IVF may be the only answer," says Trivedi. The syndrome sets in around the time of puberty and is progressive in nature.

In women suffering from PCOS, the eggs stop developing. The cysts are the immature follicles that fail to be expelled from the ovary. These cysts, which resemble a string of pearls on the periphery of the ovary,

SHUTTERSTOCK

Week - Health

THE WEEK HEALTH MAY 31 2009 41

ING OF PEARLS

interfere with normal hormonal function, which in turn leads to more cyst formation and enlargement of ovaries.

While the symptoms of PCOS are well known, the cause is not. Says Dr Geeta Chadha, senior consultant, obstetrics and gynaecology, Indraprastha Apollo Hospitals, Delhi: "PCOS is quite a confounding disease. There is no one reason why it happens." But there are certain attributes that are common to women suffering from PCOS. "Most of these women show insulin resistance, in some there is a family history of the disease; in others, the levels of leutenising hormone are high," says Trivedi.

"There have always been indications that obesity and PCOS are closely related," says Chadha. A new study by experts at the Oxford and Imperial College, London, shows that women who inherit the 'fat gene' run a higher risk of fertility problems due to polycystic ovaries. Experts came to this conclusion after they found that the fat gene was far more common in women with PCOS. While the study was done on European women, doctors say the finding holds true for Indians as well. PCOS has been linked to abnormalities in insulin and glucose metabolism, which, in the evolutionary past, may have been an adaptive advantage allowing survival against famine.

Though no conclusive studies say it, a co-relation between lifestyle changes and increase in the number of PCOS cases is not far-fetched. Studies have found that almost 15-20 per cent women in the reproductive age group suffer from the syndrome. While there are many ways to treat the symptoms of PCOS, there is no cure for the syndrome. Says Trivedi: "Symptoms can be treated to reduce the woman's risk of developing problems later on."

Weight management goes a long way in keeping PCOS from jeopardising the patient's health. That's what Riya, too, was recommended. "My doctor told me that as long as I was active and ate healthy, I would be all right," recalls Riya, now a 22-year-old marketing executive.

But treatment for the condition may require much more than just losing weight and maintaining optimum weight, depending on the symptoms. "For those with period issues we would recommend contraceptives, those with cosmetic issues, like facial hair and acne, the treatment would be different. The doctor is the best judge of the course of treatment," explains Chadha.

Chadha has another take on the surge of PCOS cases in the last few years. "We have become such a Teflon-coated, nonstick, plastic bottle era population that I won't be surprised if all these chemicals are playing foul with our endocrine system," she feels. Her argument is that after all PCOS is a genetic condition; the gene is dormant till something triggers it. According to her, researchers need to find out what activates the gene that leads to the manifestation of PCOS. Till such a link is found, women, whether suffering from PCOS or not, need to keep the scales from tipping and stay healthy.

(Some names have been changed.)