



Menstrual Health at Work

PCOS at Work

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What is PCOS?

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is a chronic lifelong condition affecting 1 in every 8 women in the UK.

It is a common condition that affects how a woman's ovaries work.

Symptoms

PCOS affects women in different ways, so not everyone will have all these symptoms.

Some may have only mild symptoms, while others may have a wider range of more severe symptoms.

Common symptoms include:

- ➔ Irregular periods, or a complete lack of periods
- ➔ Irregular ovulation, or no ovulation at all leading to subfertility
- ➔ Unwanted facial or body hair (hirsutism), oily skin, acne
- ➔ Thinning hair or hair loss from the scalp (alopecia)
- ➔ Weight problems – being overweight, rapid weight gain, difficulty losing weight

Diagnosis & treatment

Diagnosis of PCOS is done via a blood test, which is arranged by GP, and some individuals may need follow up appointments.

Treatment of PCOS is tailored to each individual, they may include medication to regulate periods and improve ovulation.

If you can support those with PCOS by implementing minor adjustments, having open conversations and willing to understand more about the condition, it will overall improve their working life.



Workplace testimonial



“At 18 I knew that my Mum’s reassurances that she was ‘just the same’ were no longer sufficient reason for me to accept that my menstrual cycle was not normal.

My GP told me that from what he’d heard I should be grateful that I wasn’t having periods every month. Thankfully I was dissatisfied by this response and made another appointment with a different doctor. She referred me to a gynaecologist who diagnosed my PCOS relatively quickly but delivered the news in a complete vacuum except to say that I would probably never have children.

I became my own advocate and, with the support of the charity Verity, have become a self-proclaimed expert patient.

Since entering the workplace, every time I declare my PCOS in a job application, I have been referred to occupational health in order for my fitness to work to be assessed.

I have had to ask for support from my employer in relation to fertility treatments, access to toilets and flexibility regarding medical appointments. My experience of fatigue, depression and anxiety have meant my having to engage with workplace emotional support provision and to request reasonable adjustments regarding my mobility and general fitness for work.

My career has been successful and fulfilling but I meet too many others whose employment aspirations are compromised by a lack of understanding or compassion for this women’s health condition thought to affect as many as one in five.”

What can you do to support employees with PCOS?

Creating a positive working environment for those with PCOS will help employees thrive at work. **We have listed suggestions below which you can tailor to your workplace and help you support those with PCOS:**

Policies and support

- ➔ Are policies and procedures supportive of those with PCOS? Check your existing policies to ensure those with PCOS or other conditions with potentially cyclical symptoms are not disadvantaged.
- ➔ Acknowledge that some staff might be suffering with PCOS but not know they have it; always be supportive.
- ➔ Encourage staff members to feel they have a safe space and colleagues who understand their experiences.
- ➔ Be kind and compassionate.
- ➔ Take action to show women in the workplace that you are aware of the issue and are ready to advocate for them.
- ➔ Encourage having a Women's Health Advocate at work.

Raising awareness

- ➔ Raise awareness of PCOS at work to help staff feel supported. Do all managers know what PCOS is, and how this condition impacts their staff?
- ➔ Train managers to be confident having conversations about PCOS, so they are able to cascade awareness of the condition within the workplace.

- ➔ It can be incredibly supportive, empowering and a real relief for an employee to say to their line manager or their supervisor, "I have PCOS," and to hear back, "I know what that is; let's have a conversation around how it impacts you and how we can support you".

Practical considerations

Think about practical arrangements that could help someone with PCOS at work, for example:

- ➔ Easy access to toilets.
- ➔ Access to private spaces if experiencing pain.
- ➔ If you have a workforce that requires you to wear a uniform, it is worth considering what that might be like for someone with PCOS. For example, if some one is experiencing heavy menstrual bleeding, are you asking staff to wear light colours?
- ➔ PCOS affects weight, so think about having different sizes available in uniforms so those who have the condition feel comfortable at work.
- ➔ Consider flexibility around working hours, this would benefit those with PCOS and enable them to thrive at work.
- ➔ Allow staff to take doctors' appointments as they are very rare to come by but also because some appointments are synced with menstrual cycles and have to be conducted at certain times in the month and even within the day.

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