

# PCOS and Obesity: Breaking the Blame Cycle



Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is a common hormonal condition that affects many women of reproductive age. It has been observed that about 40%–80% of women with PCOS are overweight.<sup>1</sup>

In the past, people thought obesity (excessive body fat) was the main cause of PCOS because many women with PCOS were overweight. However, being overweight is not a criterion for identifying women with PCOS and it does not fully explain why PCOS occurs.<sup>2</sup>

**Not all women who are overweight have PCOS, and not all women with PCOS are overweight.<sup>2</sup>**

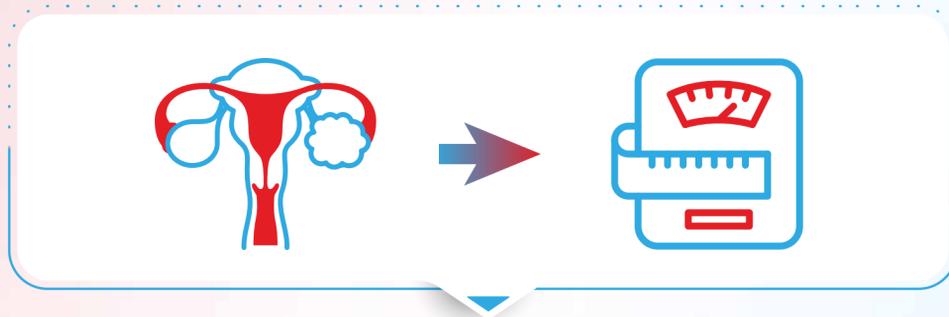
## Impact of obesity on PCOS



Obesity is commonly thought to worsen PCOS by increasing insulin resistance (the body does not respond properly to insulin, so glucose stays in the blood instead of being used for energy). However, it can also affect PCOS in other ways. For example, obesity can lead to higher levels of male hormones (such as testosterone) in the body.<sup>2</sup>

Obesity can also disturb the normal functioning of the brain–ovary hormone system that controls the menstrual cycle. In women with PCOS, being overweight worsens hormone issues compared to women with PCOS who have a healthy weight. Overweight women with PCOS are also more likely to have irregular periods and problems with ovulation than women with PCOS who are not overweight.<sup>2</sup>

## PCOS as a risk factor for causing obesity



Even if the overall weight of women with PCOS is normal, they tend to carry more weight around the waist and abdomen compared to other women of the same weight. This means they often have more ‘central’ or belly fat. Higher levels of testosterone over time may change how and where fat is stored in women with PCOS, leading to more fat around the upper body.<sup>1</sup>

### Is PCOS caused by being overweight, or does PCOS itself lead to weight gain?

Both can happen. The link between PCOS and obesity is complicated. Some girls develop symptoms of PCOS soon after their periods begin. Many women with PCOS have high insulin levels, or their insulin does not work properly. When insulin does not work as it should, it can lead to weight gain and make it harder to lose weight. In other women, PCOS may develop after significant weight gain. Overall, women who are overweight have a higher risk of developing PCOS, and women with PCOS have a higher risk of gaining weight.<sup>3</sup>

PCOS and obesity are closely interrelated, and it is important not to blame obesity alone for PCOS. Although excess weight can worsen PCOS symptoms, the hormonal and metabolic changes in PCOS can also contribute to weight gain.

**References:** 1. Sam S. Obesity and polycystic ovary syndrome. *Obes Manag.* 2007;3(2):69–73. 2. Kim JJ. Obesity and polycystic ovary syndrome. *J Obes Metab Syndr.* 2024;33(4):289–301. 3. Polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) and obesity. Available from: <https://www.obesityaction.org/resources/polycystic-ovarian-syndrome-pcos-and-obesity/>. Accessed on: 12 February 2026.

