

23 August 2016

New research: Diet habits of women with polycystic ovarian syndrome

New research has found women with polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) are on the wrong diet track, putting their health at risk.

The studyⁱ, recently published in the Dietitians Association of Australia's journal *Nutrition & Dietetics*, found many women with PCOS are skipping on carbohydrates and overeating fat to manage their condition.

Researchers Dr Kathryn Hart and Dr Yvonne Jeanes compared the diets of 38 women with PCOS and 30 control women and found that while overall energy (or kilojoule) intake was similar in both groups, women with PCOS were getting more of their daily kilojoules from saturated fat (around 150kJ more) and less from carbohydrates (around 450kJ less), compared to women without PCOS.

Dietitians Association of Australia spokesperson Margaret Hays said in food terms, this means women with PCOS are eating the equivalent of a teaspoon more butter a day, and missing out on a thick slice of grainy bread or a large apple.

'To improve fertility and reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease, these women need to be choosing good-quality carbohydrates, with a low glycaemic index, and limiting saturated fat,' said Ms Hays, an Accredited Practising Dietitian.

PCOS is the most common hormonal disorder among pre-menopausal women, affecting 12 to 21 per cent of Australian women of child-bearing age – or more than half a million Australian womenⁱⁱ.

Dr Hart's research showed 61 per cent of the women in her study with PCOS were insulin resistant, compared with 39 per cent of control participants, and that even lean women with PCOS may have the genetic wiring that puts them at an increased health risk.

'If you do have PCOS, eating the right foods, getting regular exercise and maintaining a healthy weight can improve insulin resistance, helping to lower your risk of health problems linked with PCOS.

'An important message for these women is to reduce saturated fats, found in foods like butter, cream, coconut oil, fatty meat and many biscuits, cakes and pastries, and to choose lower glycaemic index foods, such as wholegrain breads, legumes and oats,' said Ms Hays.

She said women with PCOS are more likely to struggle with their weight, but healthy eating will help and losing a relatively small amount of weight (5-10%) can improve many of the symptoms of PCOS.

Ms Hays also advised women to ignore current health trends, such as shunning carbohydrate-rich grains and using saturated fats like coconut oil, as evidence is lacking to back up health benefits.

ENDS

For further information or to organise an interview with Margaret Hays, contact Felicity Curtain, Dietitians Association of Australia, on 0409 661 920.

ⁱ Hart K et al. Suboptimal dietary intake is associated with cardiometabolic risk factors in women with polycystic ovary syndrome. *Nutrition & Dietetics*. 2016; 73: 177-83.

ⁱⁱ Boyle J and Teede H. Polycystic ovarian syndrome: An update. *Australian Family Physician*. 2012; 41 (10): 752-6.

Background

Nutrition tips for women with PCOS

- Choose quality grain (cereal) foods, which are higher in fibre and have a low GI, such as wholegrain bread, oats, barley and cracked wheat.
- Limit foods containing saturated fat, such as butter, cream, cooking margarine, coconut and palm oil. Instead, replace these with foods that contain predominantly polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats such as oils, spreads, nut butters/pastes and avocado.
- Prioritise vegetables in your day, aiming to eat different types and colours. Fill half your dinner plate with vegetables, and cook at home more often, as research shows this can 'up' your vegetable intake by more than half a serve a day.
- Choose healthy snacks such as fruit, a small handful of unsalted nuts, carrot, celery or zucchini 'sticks' with dips like hummus or salsa, a slice of wholegrain fruit bread, or a tub of yoghurt, instead of biscuits, cakes, pastries or potato crisps.

A note about the Nutrition & Dietetics journal

Nutrition & Dietetics is the scientific journal of the Dietitians Association of Australia. It's Australia's leading peer-reviewed journal in its field and is published five times a year (February, April, July, September and November) by Wiley. For information on subscribing to *Nutrition & Dietetics*, including receiving new content alerts, visit: [http://ordering.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/subs.asp?ref=1747-0080&doi=10.1111/\(ISSN\)1747-0080](http://ordering.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/subs.asp?ref=1747-0080&doi=10.1111/(ISSN)1747-0080)

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