PCOS Potentially Increases Risk for COVID-19

Findings show that women with polycystic ovary syndrome face a 51% greater risk of contracting severe COVID-19.

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Women with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) may experience a higher risk of developing COVID-19, according to a study published in the European Journal of Endocrinology, CNN reports. While the results are preliminary, a wealth of anecdotal evidence also supports an association between the metabolic condition and the viral infection.

PCOS is characterized by symptoms such as overweight or obesity, hirsutism and infertility. In addition, the illness is correlated with an increased likelihood for insulin resistance, heart disease and endometrial cancer. PCOS affects 1 in 10 women of reproductive age, according to the Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health.

Wiebke Arlt, MD, a study author and the director of the Institute of Metabolism and Systems Research at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom, believes that PCOS should be considered a risk factor for COVID-19. He considers the name PCOS a misnomer (because it doesn't only affect the ovaries) and should be considered a "lifelong metabolic disease."

The inquiry found that women with PCOS experience a 51% higher risk for confirmed or suspected COVID-19 infection than those who do not have it.

"PCOS is completely underestimated in its impact. It's sort of seen as some reproductive issue that is not clinically relevant," Arlt told CNN. "But this is completely wrong…. Patients need to be seen as a high-risk population."

In many cases, this underestimation can be chalked up to the sexism that still permeates medicine, observed Arlt and Katherine Sherif, MD, the chief of Women's Health at Jefferson University's Department of Medicine in Philadelphia.

Breanna Aguilar and Kris Nealon are two PCOS patients who developed COVID-19 earlier this year and have been suffering the ill effects ever since. Dubbed "long-haulers" by doctors, they both report regularly experiencing brain fog, chronic pain and extreme fatigue.

When the pandemic first emerged, Nealon felt a twinge of fear. Diagnosed with PCOS at age 12, she is overweight and struggles with insulin resistance. The first issue is considered a comorbidity for COVID-19, so she went to her primary care physician with her concerns. He advised her not to worry about her PCOS specifically.

“He’s been nice and understanding but…you can see him be like, ‘Lady problems, don’t worry about it. This is your lungs,’” she told CNN.

For more on PCOS, read “Black Women With PCOS Face a Greater Risk for Heart Problems.” And for more about research into women’s reproductive issues, read “Study Sheds Light on Menstruation Around the World.”

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