



POLYCYSTIC OVARY SYNDROME AND YOUR SKIN: A GUIDE FOR TEENS AND ADULTS

Polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) is a common condition that can affect the skin and hair. These changes are treatable, and many options are available to help improve symptoms, skin health and confidence. This guide explains the main skin concerns in PCOS and the treatments that work best for them.

1. ACNE

- *Why does it happen?* Higher levels of certain hormones (androgens) can make oil glands more active, leading to acne on the face, chest, or back.

- *Treatments:*

- **Face washes and creams:** Products with benzoyl peroxide or topical retinoids (like adapalene or tretinoin) can help. Prescription creams with antibiotics (such as clindamycin) may be used for inflamed acne.

- **Birth control pills:** Combined oral contraceptives (COCPs) are often the first choice for moderate to severe acne in PCOS. They help balance hormones and can improve acne over several months.

- **Antiandrogens:** Medicines like spironolactone may be added if birth control pills alone are not enough. It blocks the effects of androgens and can help with acne and unwanted hair on face/body.

- **Other options:** For severe acne with scarring, isotretinoin may be considered. It requires evaluation and close monitoring with a dermatologist.

Tips: Avoid picking at pimples, use gentle cleansers, and be patient. Acne treatments make your skin more sensitive to the sun and may cause dry skin. Sunscreens and moisturizers will be your best allies in this journey. Remember: Acne treatments may take 2–3 months to show results, so patience is key.

2. HIRSUTISM (UNWANTED HAIR GROWTH)

- *Why does it happen?* Extra androgens can cause thick, dark hair to grow in places like the face, chest, or abdomen.

- *Treatments:*

- **Birth control pills:** COCPs are the first-line treatment for most teens and young adults. They lower androgen levels and help slow new hair growth.

- **Antiandrogens:** Spironolactone may be added if needed but must be used with reliable birth control to prevent harm to a developing baby.

- **Topical creams:** Eflornithine cream can slow facial hair growth, it requires a prescription.

- **Hair removal:** Shaving, waxing, plucking, threading, and bleaching are safe but temporary. For longer-lasting results, laser hair removal or electrolysis can be considered. These treatments can improve self-esteem and mood.



Tips: Medical treatments slow new hair growth but do not remove existing hair. It may take at least 6 months to notice improvement.

3. HIDRADENITIS SUPPURATIVA (HS)

- *What is it?* HS causes painful, inflamed lumps or bumps in areas like the armpits, groin, under the breasts, or buttocks.
- *What helps?*
- **Early diagnosis:** Tell your healthcare provider if you have painful bumps on underarms, groin, below your breast and/or buttocks that come and go for more than 6 months. This is KEY to promptly diagnose and treat HS and improves outcomes.
- **Lifestyle modifications:** Quitting smoking and avoiding second-hand tobacco exposure, managing weight, and wearing loose clothing can help reduce friction and flare-ups.
- **Medications:** Prescription antibiotics, body washes (benzoyl peroxide), anti-inflammatory medications, or immunotherapy drugs (biologics) may be needed for moderate to severe cases.
- **Skin care:** Use gentle cleansers and protective bandages.

4. ACANTHOSIS NIGRICANS

-*What does it look like?* Acanthosis nigricans appears as dark, thick velvet-like plaques of skin, most often on the neck, underarms, or groin. It is common in PCOS and is a sign of insulin resistance, which means the body is having trouble using insulin properly. These patches are not harmful, but they signal a higher risk for diabetes and other metabolic problems.

- *Treatments:*
- **Lifestyle changes:** The most important treatment is improving insulin sensitivity through healthy eating, regular exercise, and weight management. Even small changes can help lighten the patches and lower the risk of diabetes.
- **Medications:** If lifestyle changes are not enough, medicines like metformin and GLP-1s may be used to help the body use insulin better.
- **Skin care:** Gentle cleansing and moisturizing can help keep the skin healthy. Moisturizers with exfoliants may be used (CeraVe SA cream or lotion for Rough & Bumpy Skin with salicylic acid, Eucerin Roughness Relief with urea and ceramides, Udderly Smooth cream with urea, AmLactin Daily with ammonium lactate, Gold Bond Ultimate Cream, Rough & Bumpy Skin with AHA, BHA and PHA) to improve the appearance of acanthosis nigricans but treating the underlying insulin resistance is most important.

When to seek help: If the patches change quickly, become painful, or appear in unusual places, let your healthcare provider know.



Bonus: Moisturizing the skin and using the exfoliants listed above, may improve rough and bumpy skin on cheeks, arms and legs. This is called keratosis pilaris (KP), AKA “strawberry skin”.

5. ANDROGENIC ALOPECIA (HAIR THINNING)

- *Why does it happen?* Higher androgen levels can reduce the size of the hair follicles, causing thinning hair at the top or crown of the scalp.

- *Treatments:*

- **Topical minoxidil:** This foam or solution is applied to the scalp once or twice daily. It can slow hair loss and sometimes promote regrowth, but results may take 6–12 months.

- **Antiandrogens:** Medicines like spironolactone may be used with birth control pills to help slow hair loss.

- **Other options:** Low-dose oral minoxidil may be considered in select cases but can cause hair growth on other areas.

- **Safety:** Antiandrogens can cause birth defects if taken during pregnancy, so effective contraception is essential.

6. CONFLUENT AND RETICULATED PAPILLOMATOSIS (CARP)

- *What does it look like?* CARP causes brown, net-like plaques on the chest, back, or neck.

- *Treatment:*

- **Antibiotic pills:** Minocycline is often used for 3–6 months and can help clear this skin changes.

Take-Home Messages

- Skin and hair changes in PCOS are common and treatable.
- Treatments take time—be patient and consistent.
- Lifestyle changes can help improve skin and overall health.
- Effective contraception is important when using certain medicines.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about the best options for you.

For additional skin care information, tips and recommendations,
visit and follow Dr. Carla Torres-Zegarra's Instagram account
@DermaSkinMD.

