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How Low Do I Go? Losing Weight with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome

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Hormones. Hormones. Hormones! We love them. We hate them. We don't always understand how to work with them to get more of that lovely love side. That is where expert advice can help.

Today's case is an example of working with a hormone imbalance to overcome a weight problem.

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) is a condition that makes it easy to gain weight. And not just any weight, the worst weight. The hormone imbalances of PCOS make it easy to store fat around the waist and vital internal organs. This is the weight gain that is associated with premature death and chronic diseases that sap your energy and vitality.

I often get asked, 'Can I lose weight and enjoy optimal health when my body resists my efforts?' The answer is yes. And it is easier than you may think. Today's case is an example.

The Client--PC

PC is a 35 year old woman with PCOS having difficulty losing 10 to 20 pounds and frustrated by her apple-shaped figure despite being very active and watching what she eats.

Eating and Weight History

PC started gaining weight in adolescence. She reports having more body fat around her waist, more body hair and more acne than her peers...and not liking that.

So, she started dieting to lose weight and developed an all-or-none eating style—either all perfect with small portions and healthy foods or completely out of control with large portions topped up with occasional binges of her favourite treats, cookies and ice cream.

PC's weight yo-yo'ed with her eating style between 140-170 lbs. until her mid 20's. For the past 10 years she has better managed the extremes in her eating and kept her weight between 140-149 lbs.

PCOS BACKGROUND

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) is a common female endocrine disorder affecting 5 to 10% of women. It creates a perfect endocrine storm. The cause of PCOS is not fully understood, but it seems to begin with higher than normal levels of three types of hormones--luteinizing hormone, estrogens and androgens. When these hormones are out of balance more hormones are affected, including higher levels of insulin.

The higher insulin levels further increase androgens and promote weight gain...both of which worsen the PCOS symptoms. A "perfect storm."

Since the cause is unknown, treatment is usually targeted to managing the symptoms and weight control. Losing weight enhances sensitivity to insulin, normalizes hormone levels, reduces symptoms and can restore fertility in obese women.

PC's initial weight on consulting the writer was 149 pounds. At 5'4" tall, her Body Mass Index (BMI) was 26.0, which is borderline overweight, when assessing weight relative to height. Her waist circumference was 37 inches, a sign of central obesity. PC had a disproportionately high amount of body fat stored around her waist. This is typical in women with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, and a source of great frustration for PC.

Nutrition Problems

PC was eating the right number of calories to lose weight, but the wrong type and wrong timing for her body.

In her morning rush to work, she ate too few calories and too little protein. This led to a strong afternoon hunger she often satisfied with a sweet and starchy mid-afternoon snack. She finished her day with her main meal that was too large and too late to allow weight loss. It is a pretty typical modern lifestyle, which works for some people, but not PC. It brought her to 140 -149 pounds, but not her personal best weight.

The Solutions

PC and I worked together to find foods and meals she enjoys that work with her body. She balanced the size of each meal, increased protein intake and improved the quality of the carbohydrates and fats she consumed. She also timed her eating to match her exercise demands.

PC worked hard making progressive small changes every week for 2 months. And it paid off. She felt energized, no longer craved cookies or ice cream and no longer felt at war with her weight. Once her new lifestyle was estab-

lished, she lost 9 pounds in 5 weeks. She was at 140 pounds, with a BMI of 24.5. This is technically a healthy weight. However, her waist circumference was still too high at 35 inches. For optimal health she needed to reach 32 inches. Without PCOS, her waist circumference would likely have been under 32".

The Outcome

PC decided it was easy to continue on her current lifestyle and continue to lose weight and watch her waist circumference. At 130 pounds (BMI=22.7) her waist circumference was 32". She decided to use that as her upper weight and settled in at 125-130 pounds.

So far she has maintained that weight for one year and reports feeling better than ever. Her portions at each meal are a little larger and she allows occasional weekend indulgences, but she continues to maintain the same lifestyle that she used to lose the weight. PC reports that she loves her food and no longer battles with the scale...or measuring tape.

