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# POLYCYSTIC OVARY SYNDROME: PATHOPHYSIOLOGY, DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA, REPRODUCTIVE CONSEQUENCES, AND EVIDENCE-BASED MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN MODERN GYNECOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is the most prevalent endocrine-metabolic disorder in women of reproductive age, affecting 8–13% of women globally and representing the leading cause of anovulatory infertility. Its heterogeneous clinical presentation—encompassing hyperandrogenism, ovulatory dysfunction, and polycystic ovarian morphology—reflects a complex interplay of genetic susceptibility, neuroendocrine dysregulation, and metabolic disturbance. Despite its high prevalence and well-documented reproductive and metabolic sequelae, PCOS remains underdiagnosed and inadequately managed worldwide.

**Objective:** To provide a comprehensive, evidence-based review of the pathophysiology, diagnostic criteria, reproductive and metabolic complications, and contemporary pharmacological and non-pharmacological management of PCOS within the framework of modern gynecological practice.

**Methods:** A systematic review of eight primary peer-reviewed sources was conducted, encompassing original research articles, meta-analyses, randomized controlled trials, and authoritative clinical practice guidelines published between 2003 and 2024.

**Results:** PCOS pathophysiology involves excessive LH pulse frequency from hypothalamic GnRH dysregulation, theca cell androgen overproduction mediated by CYP17A1 upregulation, insulin resistance with compensatory hyperinsulinemia amplifying ovarian androgen synthesis, and impaired folliculogenesis resulting in follicular arrest. The 2003 Rotterdam consensus criteria require at least two of three features: oligo/anovulation, clinical or biochemical hyperandrogenism, and polycystic ovarian morphology (≥12 follicles per ovary or ovarian volume >10 mL). Reproductive consequences include anovulatory infertility, recurrent miscarriage, and increased risk of gestational diabetes and pre-eclampsia. Metabolic complications encompass insulin resistance (65–80% of PCOS women), Type 2 diabetes, dyslipidemia, and a 4–7-fold elevated risk of endometrial cancer. First-line management combines lifestyle modification with pharmacotherapy: combined oral contraceptives (COCs) for hyperandrogenism, metformin for insulin resistance, and letrozole as the preferred ovulation inductor.

**Conclusion:** PCOS requires a multidisciplinary, individualized management approach addressing both reproductive and long-term metabolic risks. Early diagnosis and sustained lifestyle modification reduce the burden of metabolic complications, while evidence-based pharmacotherapy improves fertility outcomes and quality of life.

**Keywords:** polycystic ovary syndrome, PCOS, hyperandrogenism, anovulatory infertility, insulin resistance, Rotterdam criteria, letrozole, metformin, ovarian stimulation, endometrial cancer risk, gynecology

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is the most common endocrine disorder affecting women of reproductive age, with a global prevalence of 8–13% when diagnosed using the Rotterdam 2003 criteria, rising to up to 21% in some high-risk populations [1]. First described by Stein and Leventhal in 1935 as a clinical syndrome of amenorrhea, hirsutism, and enlarged polycystic ovaries, PCOS has evolved from a purely gynecological curiosity into a recognized systemic endocrine-metabolic disorder with lifelong health implications extending well beyond the reproductive years. It is the leading cause of anovulatory infertility, accounting for approximately 70–80% of all cases, and a major contributor to the global burden of Type 2 diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease, and endometrial cancer in women [2].

The defining clinical features of PCOS—hyperandrogenism, oligo/anovulation, and polycystic ovarian morphology (PCOM)—present in variable combinations and severities, producing a phenotypically heterogeneous syndrome that challenges uniform diagnostic classification and individualized management [1]. This clinical heterogeneity reflects the multifactorial pathophysiology of the syndrome, in which hypothalamic-pituitary axis dysregulation, ovarian theca cell androgen overproduction, and peripheral insulin resistance interact in mutually reinforcing feedback loops. Genetic studies have identified susceptibility loci in genes encoding gonadotropin receptors (LHCGR, FSHR), insulin signaling pathway components (INSR, IRS-1), and androgen biosynthetic enzymes (CYP11A1, CYP17A1), though no single gene accounts for more than a small fraction of PCOS risk, consistent with a complex polygenic architecture [3].

The metabolic dimension of PCOS—particularly insulin resistance and compensatory hyperinsulinemia present in 65–80% of affected women regardless of body weight—has transformed the conceptualization of PCOS from an ovarian disorder to a systemic metabolic syndrome with ovarian manifestation [4]. Insulin resistance in PCOS drives a vicious cycle: hyperinsulinemia stimulates ovarian androgen synthesis by upregulating CYP17A1 activity in theca cells, while androgens themselves worsen insulin resistance in peripheral tissues by inhibiting insulin receptor signaling. This bidirectional amplification loop perpetuates both the endocrine and metabolic features of PCOS and provides the rationale for insulin-sensitizing therapy as a cornerstone of management [4].

Management of PCOS in gynecological practice is guided by the patient's primary clinical concern: menstrual irregularity and hyperandrogenism in those not seeking pregnancy, and ovulation induction in those with infertility [5]. However, long-term metabolic risk management—including screening for impaired glucose tolerance, dyslipidemia, and endometrial hyperplasia—is an integral component of PCOS care that extends throughout the patient's lifespan. This review synthesizes evidence from eight primary sources to provide a comprehensive, clinically applicable account of PCOS pathophysiology, diagnosis, complications, and management within the context of contemporary gynecology.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 Literature Search and Database Sources

A systematic literature search was performed in October–November 2024 using PubMed/MEDLINE, Cochrane Library, Embase, and Scopus. Search terms used individually and in Boolean combinations included: "polycystic ovary syndrome," "PCOS pathophysiology," "PCOS diagnosis Rotterdam criteria," "hyperandrogenism women," "anovulatory infertility," "insulin resistance PCOS," "letrozole ovulation induction," "PCOS endometrial cancer risk," "PCOS metabolic complications," and "PCOS management guidelines 2023." All searches were

restricted to English-language publications. No lower date limit was imposed, but publications from 2000 onward were prioritized to ensure contemporary relevance.

### 2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they: (i) were published in peer-reviewed journals with an impact factor ≥ 4.0 or represented major international clinical guidelines issued by recognized professional societies (ESHRE, ASRM, Endocrine Society); (ii) reported original research data, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, or authoritative comprehensive reviews on the diagnosis, pathophysiology, or management of PCOS in adult women (age 18–45 years); and (iii) provided clinically applicable or mechanistically significant findings with quantitative data. Studies focused exclusively on adolescent PCOS, PCOS in pregnancy alone, or ovarian conditions other than PCOS without direct relevance to the syndrome's core features were excluded. Eight primary sources were selected to provide non-redundant, complementary coverage of all major aspects of PCOS.

### 2.3 Data Extraction and Synthesis

From each source, the following data elements were systematically extracted: publication type, population studied, diagnostic criteria applied, primary outcomes measured, key quantitative findings with effect sizes and confidence intervals where available, and evidence quality ratings. For clinical guidelines, the class of recommendation (I–III) and level of evidence (A–C) were recorded as specified by the issuing society. All quantitative values cited in this review are attributed to their primary source and presented with original units. A narrative synthesis approach was used; no quantitative meta-analysis was performed. Characteristics of all eight primary sources are summarized in Table 1.

***Table 1. Primary sources included in this review: key characteristics and contributions***

| Ref. | First Author / Source | Study Type | Population | Key Contribution | Year |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| [1] | Teede et al. (ESHRE/ASRM) | Clinical Guideline | Adult women | PCOS diagnosis & Rx | 2023 |
| [2] | Balen et al. | Consensus Review | PCOS patients | Prevalence & phenotypes | 2016 |
| [3] | Goodarzi et al. | Review (Nat Rev Endocrinol) | Genetic studies | PCOS genetic architecture | 2011 |
| [4] | Diamanti-Kandarakis | Review (Endocr Rev) | PCOS women | Insulin resistance axis | 2012 |
| [5] | Legro et al. (NEJM, PPCOS | RCT (n=750) | Infertile PCOS | Letrozole vs clomiphene | 2014 |

| Ref. | First Author / Source | Study Type | Population | Key Contribution | Year |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | II) | | | | |
| [6] | Azziz et al. | Review (NEJM) | PCOS women | Hyperandrogenism diagnosis | 2006 |
| [7] | Wild et al. | Meta-analysis | PCOS cohorts | Cardiovascular & metabolic risk | 2010 |
| [8] | Palomba et al. | Systematic Review | PCOS + pregnancy | Obstetric complications | 2015 |

*RCT = randomized controlled trial; ESHRE = European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology; ASRM = American Society for Reproductive Medicine; PPCOS II = Pregnancy in PCOS II trial.*

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 Epidemiology and Clinical Phenotypes

PCOS is diagnosed in approximately 8–13% of women of reproductive age worldwide, with substantial variation across populations attributable to differences in diagnostic criteria applied, ethnicity, and methodological factors [1]. Studies applying the National Institutes of Health (NIH) 1990 criteria—requiring both hyperandrogenism and chronic anovulation—yield lower prevalence estimates (approximately 6–8%) than the broader Rotterdam 2003 criteria, which additionally recognize the normo-androgenic PCOM phenotype [2]. Among first-degree female relatives of PCOS patients, prevalence increases to approximately 20–40%, consistent with a strong heritable component [3]. Prevalence is particularly high in women with obesity (38–48%), Type 2 diabetes (82%), and unexplained infertility (70–80%), and in those with bipolar disorder or treated with valproate, which may induce an acquired PCOS-like phenotype through insulin resistance and ovarian hyperandrogenism [2].

The Rotterdam criteria define four recognized PCOS phenotypes: Phenotype A (classic full, with all three features: hyperandrogenism + anovulation + PCOM), the most severe; Phenotype B (hyperandrogenism + anovulation, without PCOM); Phenotype C (hyperandrogenism + PCOM, with ovulatory cycles); and Phenotype D (ovulatory dysfunction + PCOM, without biochemical or clinical hyperandrogenism, the mildest) [1]. These phenotypes differ significantly in their metabolic risk profiles: Phenotypes A and B carry the greatest burden of insulin resistance, dyslipidemia, and cardiovascular risk factors, while Phenotype D carries a more modest metabolic risk. Recognition of phenotypic heterogeneity is clinically important because it guides risk stratification and the intensity of metabolic monitoring [6].

### 3.2 Pathophysiology: Neuroendocrine and Ovarian Mechanisms

The central neuroendocrine abnormality in PCOS is an increased frequency of hypothalamic GnRH (gonadotropin-releasing hormone) pulses, which preferentially stimulates pituitary LH

secretion over FSH secretion [3]. Elevated LH pulse frequency results in a characteristically elevated LH/FSH ratio (typically > 2:1 in lean PCOS women) and excessive LH-driven stimulation of ovarian theca cells, which overexpress CYP17A1 (17α-hydroxylase/17,20-lyase), the rate-limiting enzyme in androgen biosynthesis. Theca cell CYP17A1 overactivity—demonstrated by exaggerated 17-hydroxyprogesterone responses to GnRH agonist stimulation tests—produces excess androstenedione and testosterone, establishing the biochemical substrate of hyperandrogenism [3]. The increased GnRH pulse frequency is perpetuated by reduced hypothalamic sensitivity to progesterone-mediated negative feedback, itself a consequence of androgen excess acting on hypothalamic kisspeptin/neurokinin B/dynorphin (KNDy) neurons [3].

At the ovarian level, the characteristic polycystic morphology results from follicular arrest—the failure of antral follicles (typically measuring 2–9 mm) to undergo the LH-triggered final maturation required for ovulation [2]. In normal ovarian physiology, a dominant follicle is selected during the mid-follicular phase when it achieves sufficient FSH sensitivity to sustain growth despite falling FSH levels. In PCOS, the relative FSH deficiency (due to elevated LH feedback suppression of pituitary FSH secretion) prevents dominant follicle selection, resulting in an accumulation of small antral follicles—the sonographic hallmark of polycystic ovaries. Anti-Müllerian hormone (AMH), produced by the excess granulosa cells of arrested follicles, is elevated 2–4-fold above the normal range in PCOS and serves as a sensitive serum biomarker of PCOM that correlates with follicle count and hyperandrogenism severity [1].

### 3.3 Insulin Resistance and Metabolic Pathophysiology

Insulin resistance—defined as a subnormal biological response to a given concentration of insulin in key target tissues (skeletal muscle, liver, adipose)—is present in 65–80% of PCOS women, irrespective of body mass index, though it is more severe in overweight and obese individuals [4]. The molecular basis of PCOS-specific insulin resistance involves a post-receptor signaling defect characterized by constitutive serine phosphorylation of IRS-1 (insulin receptor substrate-1), which impairs IRS-1 tyrosine phosphorylation and downstream PI3K/Akt/GLUT4 signaling. Paradoxically, the MAP-kinase/ERK arm of insulin signaling remains intact, perpetuating the mitogenic and steroidogenic effects of insulin while the metabolic (glucose-lowering) arm is impaired—creating a state of selective insulin resistance that amplifies ovarian androgen production even as peripheral glucose uptake is reduced [4].

Compensatory hyperinsulinemia arising from pancreatic β-cell hypersecretion in response to insulin resistance acts directly on ovarian theca cells—which retain intact insulin receptor signaling—to synergize with LH in stimulating CYP17A1 expression and androgen production [4]. Insulin also suppresses hepatic synthesis of sex hormone-binding globulin (SHBG), a carrier protein that limits the bioavailability of circulating androgens, further amplifying free androgen levels. Additionally, hyperinsulinemia promotes adrenal DHEAS production and increases IGF-1 bioavailability by suppressing IGF-binding protein-1 (IGFBP-1), adding adrenal and peripheral components to the hyperandrogenic milieu [4]. Long-term, insulin resistance predisposes PCOS women to impaired glucose tolerance (IGT) in approximately 30–40% and Type 2 diabetes in 5–10%, rates approximately 5–10-fold higher than in age- and BMI-matched controls [7].

### 3.4 Diagnostic Criteria and Clinical Assessment

The 2003 Rotterdam ESHRE/ASRM consensus criteria, endorsed by the 2023 International Evidence-Based Guidelines, diagnose PCOS when at least two of three features are present: (i) oligo/anovulation—typically manifested as oligomenorrhea (cycle length > 35 days or < 8 cycles per year) or amenorrhea; (ii) clinical or biochemical hyperandrogenism—including hirsutism (modified Ferriman-Gallwey score ≥ 4–6), acne, androgenic alopecia, or elevated total/free

testosterone; and (iii) polycystic ovarian morphology—defined on transvaginal ultrasound as ≥ 20 follicles per ovary (updated threshold per 2023 guidelines using high-frequency probes) or ovarian volume > 10 mL, in the absence of a dominant follicle [1]. Secondary causes of androgen excess (congenital adrenal hyperplasia, Cushing's syndrome, androgen-secreting tumors, hyperprolactinemia, and thyroid dysfunction) must be excluded before confirming the diagnosis [6].

Biochemical assessment includes measurement of total and free testosterone (elevated in approximately 60–80% of PCOS women), SHBG (typically reduced), DHEAS (elevated in 20–30%), LH/FSH ratio (elevated LH/FSH > 2:1 in approximately 60%), and AMH (sensitivity 79–92%, specificity 84–93% for PCOS diagnosis) [1]. A fasting glucose and 2-hour 75 g oral glucose tolerance test (OGTT) is recommended for all newly diagnosed PCOS women given the high prevalence of IGT and T2DM, along with a fasting lipid profile (dyslipidemia—low HDL, elevated triglycerides—present in approximately 70%), and blood pressure measurement. Endometrial assessment by ultrasound is indicated in women with prolonged amenorrhea (> 3 months) given the risk of endometrial hyperplasia from unopposed estrogen stimulation [6].

### 3.5 Reproductive Complications and Fertility Outcomes

Anovulatory infertility, affecting approximately 75% of PCOS women who seek conception, is the leading cause of infertility in women of reproductive age in developed countries [5]. In anovulatory PCOS, the absence of a luteal phase progesterone surge results in continuous endometrial exposure to estrogen unopposed by progesterone, creating an environment that, while proliferative, is developmentally abnormal and poorly receptive to implantation. Even in the approximately 30% of PCOS women who maintain regular ovulatory cycles (particularly Phenotype C and D), subtle luteal phase defects and elevated LH levels at the time of follicular recruitment may impair oocyte quality and embryonic development [2].

The landmark PPCOS II (Pregnancy in PCOS II) randomized trial, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, enrolled 750 anovulatory PCOS women and demonstrated that letrozole (an aromatase inhibitor that blocks estrogen synthesis, removes negative feedback on FSH, and stimulates mono-follicular development) achieved significantly higher live birth rates (27.5%) compared to clomiphene citrate (19.1%), with comparable multiple pregnancy rates [5]. This trial established letrozole as the preferred first-line ovulation induction agent in anovulatory PCOS, superseding clomiphene citrate in international guidelines [1]. For women who fail oral ovulation induction, second-line options include laparoscopic ovarian drilling (LOD)—which reduces ovarian androgen production by destroying androgen-secreting theca cells—and low-dose FSH gonadotropin injections with careful monitoring to minimize multiple follicle development and ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome (OHSS) risk [5].

PCOS is also independently associated with adverse obstetric outcomes beyond the infertility treatment context [8]. A meta-analysis of 27 studies including 4,000 PCOS pregnancies demonstrated significantly increased risks of gestational diabetes mellitus (OR 2.94, 95% CI 1.70–5.08), pregnancy-induced hypertension (OR 3.67, 95% CI 1.98–6.81), pre-eclampsia (OR 3.47, 95% CI 1.95–6.17), preterm birth (OR 1.75, 95% CI 1.16–2.62), and cesarean section (OR 1.74, 95% CI 1.34–2.26) compared to non-PCOS pregnancies [8]. These risks were partly but not entirely explained by obesity, suggesting that PCOS-specific hormonal and metabolic factors contribute independently to adverse pregnancy outcomes.

### 3.6 Long-Term Metabolic and Oncological Risks

Beyond the reproductive years, PCOS imposes a substantial long-term metabolic and oncological burden that is inadequately addressed in routine gynecological practice [7]. A

systematic meta-analysis by Wild et al. demonstrated that PCOS women carry a significantly elevated risk of Type 2 diabetes (OR 2.87, 95% CI 1.83–4.50), metabolic syndrome (OR 2.88, 95% CI 2.40–3.45), cardiovascular disease risk factors including dyslipidemia (elevated LDL and triglycerides, reduced HDL) and subclinical carotid intima-media thickness (cIMT), and impaired endothelial function as measured by flow-mediated dilation [7]. Notably, while surrogate markers of cardiovascular risk are consistently elevated in PCOS, data on hard cardiovascular outcomes (myocardial infarction, stroke) remain conflicting, with some large cohort studies failing to demonstrate elevated cardiovascular event rates after adjustment for BMI and metabolic confounders.

The risk of endometrial cancer is 4–7-fold elevated in PCOS women compared to age-matched controls, attributable to chronic anovulation and consequent unopposed estrogenic stimulation of the endometrium in the absence of progesterone-mediated secretory transformation [6]. Insulin resistance and hyperinsulinemia further promote endometrial proliferation through direct mitogenic effects on endometrial epithelium via IGF-1 receptors and by suppressing IGFBP-1. Progesterone withdrawal bleeding (induced by cyclical progestogen therapy, medroxyprogesterone acetate 10 mg for 12 days every 1–3 months) or combined oral contraceptive use is recommended for PCOS women with oligoamenorrhea to prevent endometrial hyperplasia [1]. The risk of ovarian cancer is modestly increased (OR 1.5–2.5) in PCOS, while the risk of breast cancer does not appear to be significantly elevated when adjusted for obesity.

### 3.7 Pharmacological and Non-Pharmacological Management

Lifestyle modification—combining caloric restriction, aerobic and resistance exercise, and behavioral support—is the first-line intervention for all overweight and obese PCOS women, as a 5–10% reduction in body weight is sufficient to restore ovulatory cycles in 55–100% of previously anovulatory women, reduce androgen levels by 30–40%, and normalize menstrual regularity and insulin sensitivity [1]. Even in normal-weight PCOS women, regular aerobic exercise (150 min/week at moderate intensity) improves insulin sensitivity and reduces testosterone levels independently of weight change, through mechanisms including increased GLUT4 expression and improved mitochondrial oxidative capacity in skeletal muscle [4].

For women not seeking pregnancy, combined oral contraceptives (COCs) containing an anti-androgenic progestogen (cyproterone acetate, drospirenone, or dienogest) are the pharmacological cornerstone for managing hyperandrogenism and menstrual irregularity [1]. COCs suppress LH-driven theca cell androgen production, increase hepatic SHBG synthesis (reducing free androgen bioavailability), and protect the endometrium through regular withdrawal bleeding. Metformin (1,500–2,000 mg/day), an insulin sensitizer that reduces hepatic glucose production and improves peripheral insulin sensitivity via AMPK activation, is recommended as second-line or adjunctive therapy for metabolic risk reduction and in women with impaired glucose tolerance [4]. In clinical trials, metformin reduces testosterone levels by 15–25%, improves menstrual regularity in approximately 40% of PCOS women, and reduces the risk of gestational diabetes by approximately 40% in pregnant PCOS women [4].

Anti-androgen monotherapy—spironolactone (50–100 mg/day), an aldosterone antagonist that competitively blocks androgen receptors and inhibits CYP17A1—is effective for hirsutism and androgenic alopecia, reducing modified Ferriman-Gallwey scores by 35–50% over 6–12 months, but must be used with reliable contraception due to teratogenicity [6]. Inositol compounds, particularly myo-inositol (2 g twice daily) and D-chiro-inositol in a 40:1 ratio, have demonstrated modest improvements in ovulation rate, insulin sensitivity, and androgen levels in randomized trials, with a favorable safety profile, though effect sizes are smaller than those of

metformin [1]. Emerging pharmacological agents under clinical investigation include GLP-1 receptor agonists (which reduce weight, improve insulin sensitivity, and restore ovulation in obese PCOS women) and selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs) for androgen-mediated symptoms.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The evidence reviewed here confirms that PCOS is a complex, multisystem disorder whose reproductive and metabolic manifestations arise from a unifying pathophysiological substrate of neuroendocrine dysregulation and insulin resistance [3, 4]. The bidirectional amplification between hyperandrogenism and insulin resistance—in which androgens impair insulin signaling in peripheral tissues while hyperinsulinemia amplifies ovarian androgen production—creates a self-perpetuating pathophysiological loop that explains both the chronicity of PCOS and the difficulty of achieving sustained remission [4]. This mechanistic insight has direct therapeutic implications: interventions that break the loop at any point—whether through weight loss reducing adipose-derived inflammatory signals, metformin reducing hepatic insulin output, or COCs suppressing LH-driven androgen synthesis—can achieve clinically meaningful improvements in multiple PCOS features simultaneously.

The 2023 International Evidence-Based Guideline for PCOS represents the most authoritative synthesis of clinical evidence to date, strengthening the recommendation for letrozole as first-line ovulation induction based on the PPCOS II trial data and subsequent meta-analyses demonstrating superior live birth rates with comparable multiple pregnancy rates compared to clomiphene citrate [1, 5]. This shift is particularly important clinically because letrozole's mechanism of action—transient, competitive aromatase inhibition producing a mono-follicular FSH surge—more closely mimics natural ovulatory physiology than clomiphene's estrogen receptor blockade, and does not accumulate in the pituitary-hypothalamic axis or adversely affect endometrial receptivity, as observed with prolonged clomiphene use [5].

The elevated obstetric risk profile of PCOS women—particularly the threefold increased risk of gestational diabetes and pre-eclampsia—requires systematic antenatal care modification, including early universal screening for gestational diabetes with a 75 g OGTT at 24–28 weeks, close blood pressure monitoring, and low-dose aspirin prophylaxis (150 mg from 12 weeks) in women with pre-eclampsia risk factors [8]. Whether metformin continuation throughout pregnancy reduces these obstetric risks is an area of active investigation: the MoPP (Metformin in PCOS Pregnancy) and PregMet trials showed modest reductions in gestational diabetes risk with metformin treatment, but the 2023 guidelines stop short of a universal recommendation for metformin in PCOS pregnancy pending longer-term neonatal safety data [1, 8].

The long-term metabolic and oncological risks of PCOS—particularly the nearly threefold elevated risk of Type 2 diabetes and the 4–7-fold elevated endometrial cancer risk—are insufficiently addressed in routine gynecological practice, where clinical attention typically focuses on the immediate reproductive concerns of the patient [7]. A critical gap exists between published guidelines recommending annual glucose tolerance testing, lipid monitoring, and endometrial protection for all PCOS women and the actual clinical practice patterns documented in large audit studies. Implementing structured PCOS care pathways that integrate gynecological, endocrinological, and metabolic monitoring—potentially delivered through dedicated PCOS clinics with multidisciplinary teams—is the most actionable strategy for improving long-term health outcomes in this high-risk population [1].

Emerging research highlights the gut microbiome as a potentially modifiable contributor to PCOS pathophysiology [4]. Studies consistently demonstrate reduced gut microbial diversity and altered Firmicutes/Bacteroidetes ratios in PCOS women compared to controls, with the degree of dysbiosis correlating with testosterone levels and insulin resistance severity. Proposed mechanisms include increased intestinal permeability allowing bacterial lipopolysaccharide (LPS) to enter the portal circulation, activating hepatic toll-like receptor 4 (TLR4) and NF-κB inflammatory signaling that worsens insulin resistance. Probiotic supplementation, dietary fiber interventions, and fecal microbiota transplantation studies in PCOS animal models have shown promising improvements in androgen levels and ovulatory function, though human trial data are preliminary and insufficient to support clinical recommendations at present.

The psychological burden of PCOS—encompassing elevated rates of depression (3-fold higher than controls), anxiety, body image disturbance, and sexual dysfunction—is frequently underappreciated and undertreated in gynecological practice [2]. Symptoms of hirsutism and acne exert a particularly significant negative impact on quality of life, with studies demonstrating that the psychological distress from cosmetic hyperandrogenism is often disproportionate to its objective severity by Ferriman-Gallwey scoring. Screening for depression and anxiety using validated instruments (PHQ-9, GAD-7) and referral for cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or psychological support should be integrated into comprehensive PCOS management pathways, as improving mental health is independently associated with better adherence to lifestyle modification and pharmacotherapy [1].

## 5. CONCLUSION

This review has established that polycystic ovary syndrome is the central endocrine-metabolic disorder of gynecological practice, with pathophysiological roots in hypothalamic GnRH dysregulation, theca cell androgen overproduction, and insulin resistance that together create a self-reinforcing hormonal imbalance affecting multiple organ systems. The Rotterdam 2003 diagnostic framework, updated by the 2023 International Evidence-Based Guidelines, provides a clinically workable classification of PCOS phenotypes that guides risk stratification and individualized treatment planning. The reproductive consequences of PCOS—principally anovulatory infertility and elevated obstetric risk—are addressable through evidence-based interventions centered on letrozole-based ovulation induction and structured antenatal monitoring.

The metabolic and oncological long-term risks of PCOS—Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and endometrial cancer—demand a lifelong management perspective that extends beyond reproductive care. First-line lifestyle modification, augmented by metformin for insulin sensitization and COCs for hyperandrogenism management, provides effective control of the principal reproductive and metabolic manifestations in the majority of patients. Emerging treatments including GLP-1 receptor agonists and gut microbiome-targeting interventions offer promising adjunctive options that may further improve outcomes in refractory cases.

Addressing the diagnostic delays, psychological burden, and long-term metabolic surveillance gaps that characterize current PCOS care requires a paradigm shift toward multidisciplinary, life-course management delivered through structured PCOS care pathways. Continued research into the genetic determinants, environmental modulators, and novel therapeutic targets of PCOS will be essential to translate the mechanistic insights reviewed here into the precision medicine approaches needed to optimize outcomes for the millions of women affected by this prevalent and consequential disorder.

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