

Patient information factsheet

Premature ovarian insufficiency (POI)

We have given you this factsheet because you have been diagnosed with premature ovarian insufficiency (POI). It explains what POI is, its symptoms, and the treatments available. We hope it will answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions, please speak to a member of our team using the contact details at the end of the factsheet.

What are the ovaries?

The ovaries are two small, oval-shaped glands that are part of the female reproductive system. They are located on either side of the uterus (womb). The ovaries have two main functions:

- to produce the sex hormones oestrogen and progesterone (these play an important role in reproduction)
- to release an egg each month as part of the menstrual cycle (your period)

What is premature ovarian insufficiency (POI)?

POI is a condition where the ovaries stop working normally before you are 40 years old. It occurs when the ovaries stop making normal levels of certain hormones, particularly the hormone oestrogen.

POI affects less than 1% of people with ovaries.

What causes POI?

POI can be caused by:

- the surgical removal of both ovaries, with or without a hysterectomy (a surgical procedure to remove the womb)
- cancer treatments (such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy)
- autoimmune conditions (such as thyroid or adrenal disease)
- certain infections (such as mumps)

POI can sometimes run in families. This might be the case if any of your relatives went through the menopause at a very young age (20s or early 30s).

However, there is often no underlying cause for POI.

What are the symptoms of POI?

The symptoms of POI vary. Some people do not experience symptoms, while others experience several symptoms.

POI can cause menopausal symptoms, including:

- hot flushes
- night sweats
- irritability
- mood swings
- psychosexual symptoms, such as a reduced sex drive (libido)
- sleep disturbances
- vaginal dryness
- vaginal or vulval irritation (itching or burning sensation on the inside or outside of the genital area)
- joint pains

POI can also cause:

- your menstrual cycle to end
- your menstrual cycle to become irregular, with long gaps between periods
- fertility problems

How is POI diagnosed?

POI is usually diagnosed by a blood test which measures the level of a hormone called follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) in your blood. You will have two blood tests for FSH, six weeks apart. There are some different blood tests you can have to investigate the possible cause of POI. These include other hormone tests and genetic tests. We will explain these to you in more detail.

How is POI treated?

There are treatments for some of the symptoms of POI.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)

HRT is the most common treatment for POI. It gives your body the oestrogen and other hormones that your ovaries are not making. HRT can be given in the form of pills, patches, or a gel.

Combined oral contraceptive pill

The combined oral contraceptive pill can give your body the oestrogen and other hormones that your ovaries are not making.

Testosterone

Testosterone can be prescribed if you have a reduced sex drive (libido) because of POI.

Regular physical activity and a healthy, balanced diet

Exercising regularly and eating a healthy, balanced diet can improve some symptoms of POI.

We will discuss all these treatments with you in more detail so you can make an informed decision.

Length of treatment for POI

It is important that you continue taking the combined oral contraceptive pill or HRT until you have reached the average age of the menopause (50 to 51 years old), unless we have advised you otherwise.

Patient information factsheet

This will help to prevent long-term health issues associated with a lack of oestrogen, such as:

- osteoporosis (weak bones and increased risk of fractures)
- heart disease
- strokes
- memory issues
- dementia

Your doctor will explain the long-term health risks associated with a lack of oestrogen in more detail.

How will POI affect my fertility?

You may occasionally still have your period (ovulate). This means that there is a 5% chance that you will be able to become pregnant naturally. Unfortunately, where it is impossible to predict when you will have your period, you may still need to use contraception if you do not wish to fall pregnant.

However, it is important to note that the chance of you having your period will also vary if your POI has been caused by treatments for cancer. This is dependent on the type of cancer treatment you have had. You may wish to discuss this with your cancer team.

We can refer you to the fertility specialist team to discuss your fertility in more detail.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us.

Menopause team secretary

Telephone: **023 8120 6041** (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.30pm)

Useful links

NHS UK

www.nhs.uk/conditions/early-menopause

www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause

The Daisy Network

A patient-run support group for people with POI based in UK.

www.daisynetwork.org

British Infertility Counselling Association

The British Infertility Counselling Association are a registered charity and the only professional infertility counselling association recognised by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority and the British Fertility Society in the UK.

www.bica.net

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For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport**