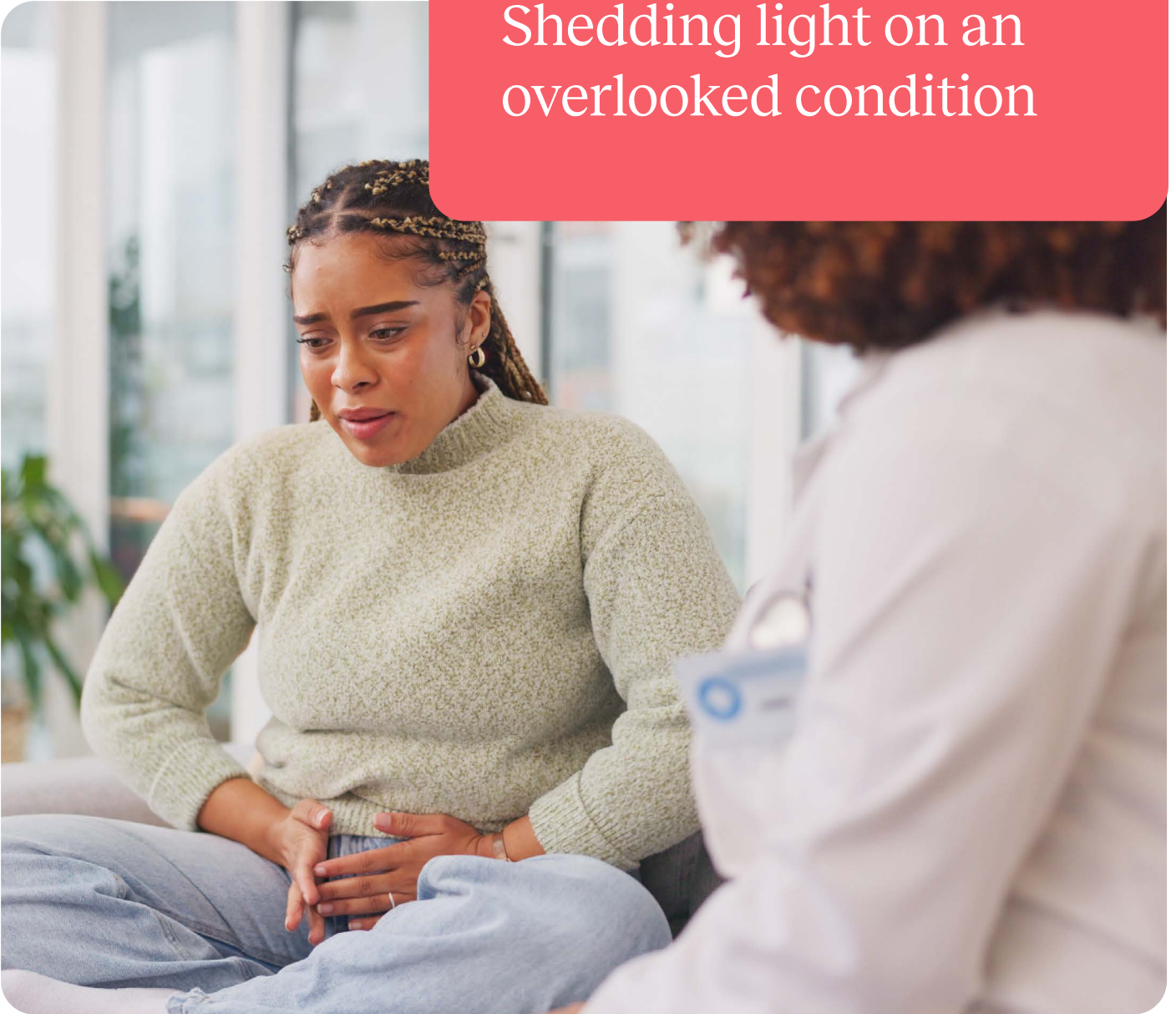


PCOS awareness: Shedding light on an overlooked condition



As we approach International Women's Day 2024, it's crucial to highlight conditions like **Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)**, which exclusively affect women yet frequently don't receive the attention they deserve. This day, celebrated globally, serves not only as a platform to honour the achievements and progress of women but also as a poignant reminder of the challenges still faced in healthcare.

Historically, women's health issues, especially those unique to female biology, have been under-researched and underfunded. A report by the **Women's Health Initiative**, for instance, shows that many conditions affecting only women, like **PCOS, endometriosis, and certain types of breast cancer**, have historically been sidelined in medical research. This lack of focus can lead to delayed diagnosis, inadequate treatment options, and poorer health outcomes for women.

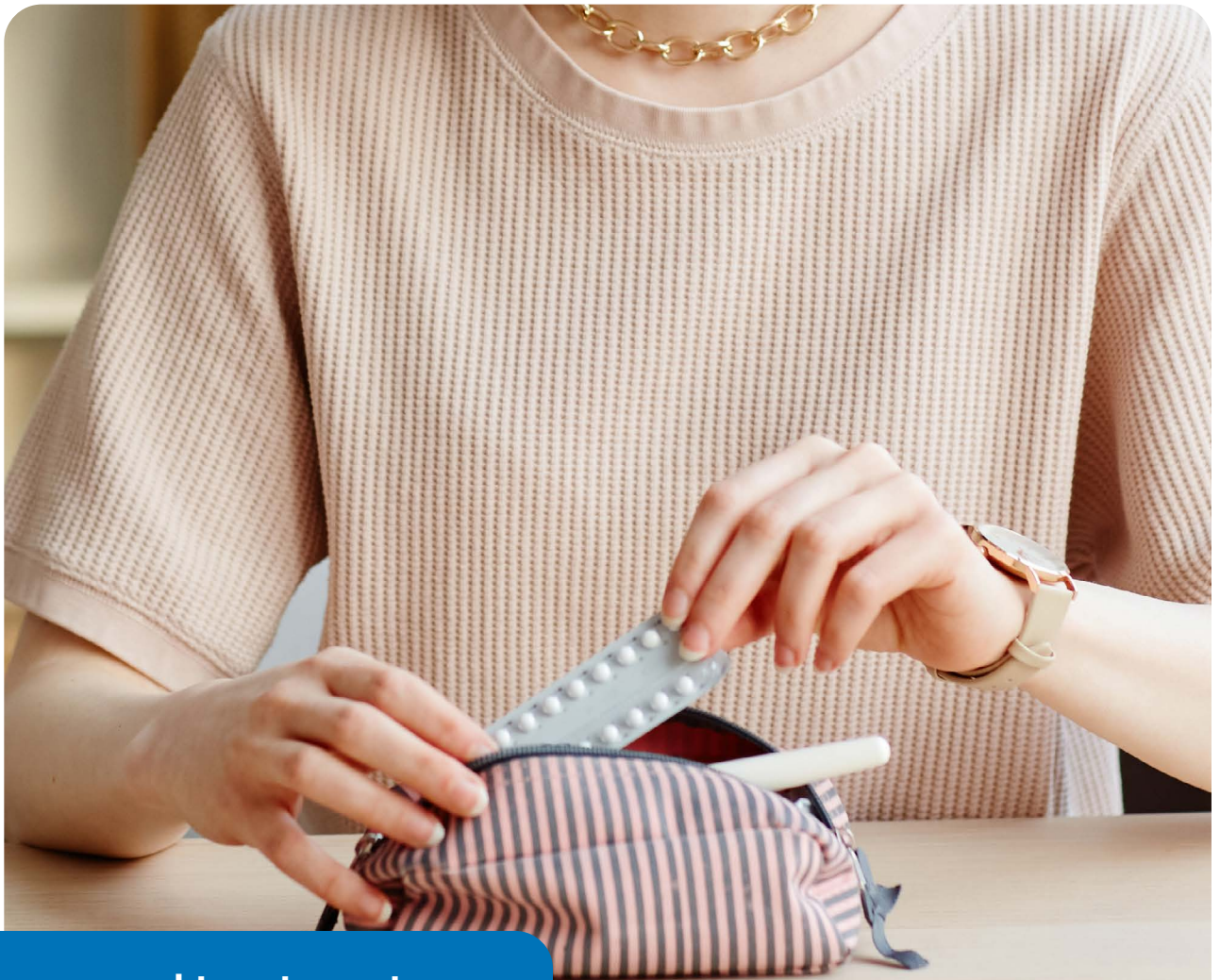
What is Polycystic Ovary Syndrome?

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) is diagnosed when two out of the following three conditions are present: **infrequent or irregular periods; excess facial or body hair, acne, or elevated testosterone levels;** and an **ultrasound showing polycystic ovaries.** However, it's important to note that one can have cysts without having PCOS, and it's possible to be diagnosed with PCOS even without the presence of ovarian cysts, which adds to the confusion. Additionally, the diagnosis of PCOS in teenagers is particularly challenging. During adolescence, ovarian cysts can be a normal part of development, and issues like acne or irregular periods are common due to hormonal changes, making early but cautious diagnosis crucial.



What does polycystic mean?

Polycystic, a term often associated with medical conditions like **Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)**, describes a state characterised by the presence of multiple small cysts. These cysts, formed from immature follicles, are typically found in the ovaries. It's important to note that these are not cysts in the traditional sense, but rather undeveloped sacs which contain eggs. In a typical menstrual cycle, a few of these sacs may start to grow, with one eventually maturing to release an egg. However, in a polycystic condition, the sacs often fail to mature properly and thus do not release eggs, leading to a disruption in the menstrual cycle and other related symptoms.



Causes and treatments

Recent studies suggest a strong **genetic component** in the development of PCOS, indicating that women with a family history of the condition are at a higher risk. Understanding this genetic predisposition is crucial, as it not only aids in early detection and intervention but also helps in tailoring treatment and management plans. Research continues to explore specific genetic markers linked to PCOS, highlighting the dynamic nature of our understanding of this condition.

While PCOS cannot be cured yet, its symptoms can be effectively managed with medication. The most common issues that patients present with include **difficulty in conceiving** and **erratic menstrual cycles**. It is important for women with PCOS to be referred to a fertility clinic earlier than those without the condition. However, it's reassuring to know that most women with PCOS can conceive, although some may require fertility support. Other symptoms such as erratic periods can sometimes be managed with contraceptive pills, and excess hair growth can be addressed through cosmetic approaches.

The impact on mental health



Recognising PCOS early is pivotal due to its spectrum of symptoms that often mimic other health conditions, leading to potential misdiagnosis or delayed diagnosis. Equally important is addressing the **mental health impact of PCOS**. The physical symptoms can significantly affect self-esteem and mental wellbeing. Recent studies have shown a higher prevalence of anxiety and depression among women with PCOS, highlighting the need for comprehensive care that includes **mental health support**. Counselling, support groups, and mental health resources play an essential role in helping women cope with the psychological aspects of PCOS.

Addressing healthcare disparities

Despite the high prevalence of PCOS, it often remains **under-recognised** within the healthcare system, partly due to non-standardised diagnostic criteria and its diverse manifestations. Women from various ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds encounter additional barriers, such as unequal access to healthcare and cultural misconceptions, which can impede timely diagnosis and treatment.

To bridge this gap, it's essential to **enhance the understanding of PCOS among healthcare professionals**. Providing specialised training for general practitioners and specialists is critical for improving recognition and management of PCOS. Additionally, advocating for increased research and dedicated resources is imperative to ensure PCOS is included in broader healthcare policy discussions. These efforts are key to overcoming systemic obstacles and ensuring equitable healthcare for all women affected by this condition.

The far-reaching effects of PCOS

The implications of Polycystic Ovary Syndrome extend far beyond irregular menstrual cycles. Beyond reproductive health, PCOS can predispose women to a host of other health challenges. There's a heightened **risk of developing type 2 diabetes**, owing to the insulin resistance that is often part of the PCOS profile. Women with PCOS are also more likely to experience **cardiovascular health issues**, including high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels. These risks underscore the importance of a holistic approach to managing PCOS, one that addresses both immediate symptoms and long-term health considerations.



Managing PCOS

Effectively managing Polycystic Ovary Syndrome involves more than medical intervention alone; it requires a **holistic approach** that integrates **lifestyle modifications**, **psychological support**, and **community involvement**. Adopting healthy lifestyle choices, particularly in diet and physical activity, has been proven to significantly alleviate symptoms and mitigate the risks of related health conditions like diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. Additionally, medical treatments, including **hormonal therapies** and **medications to regulate menstrual cycles**, play a critical role in managing hormonal imbalances and specific symptoms, such as **infertility** and **dermatological issues**.



Empowering lives through education and action

Central to empowering women with PCOS is **education**. Thorough understanding of the condition, its symptoms, and available management strategies enables women to make informed decisions about their health. Raising awareness extends beyond those directly affected; it involves educating partners, family members, and the broader community.

As we commemorate **International Women's Day 2024**, we must emphasise the importance of recognising conditions like PCOS that significantly affect women's lives. Increasing awareness is not just about sharing information; it's about **fostering empathy, promoting early intervention, and enhancing the quality of life** for numerous women.

By shining a light on this often-overlooked condition, we can pave the way for improved healthcare, support, and outcomes for women in the UK, Republic of Ireland, and beyond. Let this International Women's Day be a catalyst for ongoing conversation and advocacy, inspiring us to support women in all facets of their health and wellbeing.

Contact **HealthHero** today for more support and advice. We're with you every step of the way.