

Reaching out



Photo by Steven Doll | COLLEGIAN

K-State instructor suffers from polycystic ovarian syndrome; informs others with online magazine

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Linda Harvey said she has always known something was not quite right with her body.

Her periods were not normal, she grew hair in abnormal places and she knew something was different.

Finally, in 2001, she went to her gynecologist, who diagnosed her with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome.

"I had gone to see her for something completely different," said Harvey, instructor in journalism and mass communications. "She looked at me, cocked her head and goes, 'Have you ever been diagnosed with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome?'"

Harvey said she had not, but her doctor's question made her look more into it.

PCOS

PCOS is a condition that happens to 6 to 10 percent of women of childbearing age, according to the Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome Association. If a woman has PCOS, her ovaries do not make enough hor-

mones they need for eggs to mature. Instead, cysts in the ovaries fill with fluid.

Symptoms of PCOS include the following: irregular or absent menstrual periods, numerous cysts on the ovaries, high blood pressure, acne, elevated insulin levels, infertility, excess hair on the face and body, thinning of the scalp hair and weight problems around the midsection, according to the PCOS Association.

Harvey said she had many of those symptoms, so she decided to see a doctor.

RELIEF

Harvey said after she had the appropriate blood tests and evaluations, she was relieved to hear the diagnosis, especially after watching the movie "Wit," with Emma Thompson, she said.

Harvey said the movie was such a frightening experience that she remembered the exact date - Feb. 23, 2001.

In the movie, Thompson's character has terminal ovarian cancer.

"I scared myself shitless," Harvey

said. "At that point, I was like, 'Shit, I'm going to die.'"

For three or four months after that, Harvey said she couldn't sleep

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For more information

If you have possible symptoms of polycystic ovary syndrome, such as menstrual cycle problems or trouble getting pregnant, see your doctor for an exam. PCOS increases your risks of infertility, metabolic syndrome, uterine cancer, diabetes, and heart disease.

No single test can show that you have PCOS. Your doctor will talk to you about your medical history, do a physical exam, and run some lab tests. You may also have an ultrasound scan of your pelvis.

Women should get a breast exam every three years starting at age 20. They should get a Pap smear and pelvic exam annually at age 18 or once they are sexually active.

To make an appointment, students can call Lafene Health Center at (785) 532-6544.

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and she cried all the time. Several of the symptoms Thompson's character had in the movie were symptoms she had.

After watching the movie, she decided to get checked out for PCOS.

"That movie lit a fire in me that said, 'Hey, you're going to have to deal with your health,'" Harvey said. "It's scary, but you have to do it."

After she was diagnosed, Harvey said it was an absolute relief to find out why her body was not working right.

LIFE AFTER DIAGNOSIS

After women are diagnosed with PCOS, they often become depressed, Harvey said. She was no exception.

"When your life physically becomes a struggle, you do deal with depression," she said. "It's been one of those things that's clinically proven that when you're dealing with a chronic illness, you're going to deal with depression."

Harvey said PCOS also makes women emotional.

"Sometimes I can be a complete and absolute raving bitch to my boyfriend," she said. "He's just like, 'What's your problem?'"

Along with PCOS, Harvey also has insulin resistance, which she describes as a precursor to diabetes. About three years ago, she was diagnosed with fibromyalgia, a rheumatoid condition accompanied by chronic pain.

"There's a lot of pain, a lot of fatigue, a lot of exhaustion," she said.

On a weekly basis, she is required to take a lot of medication. She takes glucophage to regulate her insulin and glucose levels. She takes opiates, and she wears a birth control patch. She said the birth control patch is not used to keep from getting pregnant.

"Yes, I have a boyfriend, and yes, we're sexually active," she said. "It's not so much that I don't want little copies of me running around - it's to regulate my cycle."

CHILDREN

One of the hardest aspect for women with PCOS is having children, Harvey said. It is not impossible to conceive, but it is difficult because the egg does not fully develop inside a woman with PCOS. Women with PCOS receive shots that can help them conceive.

However, Harvey said because of the number of children as well as college students in her life, she is not one of those who wants children.

"I'm not in such a struggle to have children, but there are women who go through their lives trying to have children," she said. "They either miscarry or can't ovulate."

Harvey said she encourages people who might have PCOS and want children to talk to their doctors as soon as possible.

"If you have an intention of having children and you have PCOS, then you'll have a struggle with it," she said.

STAYING FIT

Harvey said one of the hardest things to do for someone with her condition is staying in shape. She used to be about 50 pounds lighter.

"I enjoyed it," she said. "I had smaller clothes and a lot more dates."

But, because of her fibromyalgia, she has put the weight back on. She said she has pain because of the condition.

"It's hard to exercise," she said. "I'm actually getting ready to start with a new rheumatologist. I'm going to go, 'Look, you've got to help me with some pain control so I can get back on the tread-

mills and back on the bikes and lose the weight."

However, some women with PCOS can be lean. There are many different forms of PCOS that affect women with different body types.

REACHING OUT

After being diagnosed with PCOS, Harvey has combined her degree in mass communications and her knowledge about PCOS to start an e-zine, called PCOS Today, at www.pcostodaymagazine.com. She said by talking about PCOS - she is not trying to make people feel sorry for her - she wants other women to know they are not alone.

"I've always had a huge passion for public awareness and public communication," she said. "I thought, 'Why am I not using this talent I've developed to convey this out there?'"

She said she does not want another woman to be in her position of depression and denial. She is even willing to talk to women in confidence about the condition.

If a student thinks they might have PCOS, Harvey said they should go to a clinic, like Lafene Health Center. She said they should know what is going on with their body.

"I can't imagine going through life and not understand what's going on inside your body," she said. "The whole idea is that ignorance is not bliss, because it can lead to so many other problems. When you know what's going on, you're physically and mentally more in tune."

If a student is diagnosed with PCOS, Harvey said she would talk to them about her experience.

"It's an embarrassing condition to deal with," she said. "About five to 10 percent of all child-bearing women around the United States are dealing with it."