

# The Role of Curcumin in Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS): Evidence and Mechanisms

Kansiime Agnes

Department of Clinical Medicine and Dentistry Kampala International University Uganda

Email:agnes.kansiime.2974@studwc.kiu.ac.ug

## ABSTRACT

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is a prevalent endocrine disorder affecting reproductive-aged women, characterized by hyperandrogenism, ovulatory dysfunction, insulin resistance, and polycystic ovarian morphology. The underlying pathophysiology of PCOS involves chronic low-grade inflammation, oxidative stress, and metabolic dysregulation, contributing to reproductive and systemic complications. Curcumin, a bioactive polyphenol derived from turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), has gained attention for its therapeutic potential in PCOS due to its anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and insulin-sensitizing properties. It modulates key pathological pathways by improving glucose metabolism, reducing androgen synthesis, and enhancing ovarian function. Additionally, curcumin has been shown to regulate follicular development, mitigate oxidative stress, and improve hormonal balance, making it a promising adjunct therapy for PCOS management. Emerging clinical studies suggest that curcumin supplementation may improve insulin resistance, menstrual irregularities, and hyperandrogenism; however, larger, well-controlled trials are required to validate these findings. Despite its promising benefits, challenges such as poor bioavailability necessitate advanced formulations for enhanced absorption. This review critically examines the mechanisms and clinical evidence supporting curcumin's role in PCOS treatment and explores its potential integration into therapeutic strategies. Further research is essential to establish curcumin as a safe and effective complementary treatment for PCOS.

**Keywords:** Curcumin, Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, Insulin Resistance, Oxidative Stress, Anti-inflammatory

## INTRODUCTION

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is a prevalent and complex endocrine disorder that affects approximately 10% of women of reproductive age [1]. It is a multifaceted condition that can manifest through a range of symptoms, including menstrual irregularities, hyperandrogenism (elevated male hormone levels), polycystic ovarian morphology, and a host of metabolic disturbances [2]. Among these metabolic issues are insulin resistance, obesity, and dyslipidemia, which can further exacerbate the condition and increase the risk of developing long-term health problems such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease [4]. The exact etiology of PCOS remains elusive but is thought to arise from a combination of genetic, hormonal, and environmental factors [5]. Genetic predisposition may make certain individuals more susceptible, while factors like poor diet, physical inactivity, and obesity may trigger or

worsen the condition. Hormonal imbalances, particularly an excess of androgens, contribute to many of the symptoms experienced by women with PCOS, including acne, excessive hair growth, and infertility [6, 7]. While conventional treatments for PCOS have been focused on addressing individual symptoms—such as hormonal therapies to regulate menstruation and insulin-sensitizing agents to improve metabolic function—these therapies do not always provide comprehensive relief and may have side effects [8]. As a result, there is growing interest in alternative, natural therapies that may offer additional benefits. One promising natural compound is curcumin, the active ingredient in turmeric. Curcumin has demonstrated anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and insulin-sensitizing properties, making it an intriguing candidate for the management of PCOS. Studies suggest that curcumin

may help alleviate some of the hormonal and metabolic disturbances associated with PCOS, potentially serving as a complementary treatment

### Pathophysiology of PCOS

The pathophysiology of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) involves a complex interaction of hormonal, metabolic, and inflammatory factors. Central to the condition is insulin resistance, which leads to hyperinsulinemia (elevated insulin levels) [11]. This excess insulin stimulates the ovaries to produce higher levels of androgens (male hormones), such as testosterone, which in turn disrupts the normal ovarian function. This hormonal imbalance contributes to anovulation (lack of ovulation) and symptoms like hirsutism (excessive hair growth) and acne [12]. Additionally, chronic low-grade inflammation and oxidative stress play key roles in the development and progression of PCOS,

### Curcumin: A Potential Therapeutic Agent for PCOS

Curcumin, the bioactive compound found in turmeric, has been increasingly recognized for its potential therapeutic benefits, particularly in managing complex conditions such as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) [14]. PCOS is a multifaceted disorder that involves hormonal imbalances, metabolic dysfunction, and systemic inflammation, all

alongside traditional therapies to improve the overall health and well-being of women affected by this condition [9,10].

promoting systemic metabolic dysfunction and further worsening insulin resistance. Emerging research has highlighted the involvement of gut microbiota and epigenetic factors in PCOS, suggesting that the balance of gut bacteria and genetic changes may influence the development of the disorder [13]. These factors contribute to the complexity of PCOS, emphasizing that it is not merely a reproductive condition but one with wide-reaching effects on metabolism, immune function, and overall health. Understanding these interconnected mechanisms is essential for developing more targeted and effective treatments for women with PCOS.

#### 1. Anti-inflammatory Effects

Chronic low-grade inflammation is a key characteristic of PCOS and plays a significant role in the progression of the disorder. Inflammation contributes to insulin resistance, ovarian dysfunction, and metabolic disturbances [16]. Curcumin's potent anti-inflammatory properties make it an effective agent for mitigating this inflammation. Research has shown that curcumin inhibits the activity of nuclear factor-kappa B (NF- $\kappa$ B), a central regulator of the inflammatory response. By reducing NF- $\kappa$ B activation, curcumin also lowers the production of

of which contribute to the array of symptoms and health complications experienced by women with the condition [15]. Curcumin's wide range of pharmacological properties, including its anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and metabolic regulatory effects, make it an appealing option for addressing the underlying pathophysiological mechanisms of PCOS.

pro-inflammatory cytokines such as tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF- $\alpha$ ), interleukin-6 (IL-6), and interleukin-1 beta (IL-1 $\beta$ ) [17]. These cytokines are involved in various inflammatory pathways that exacerbate insulin resistance and ovarian dysfunction in PCOS [18]. By reducing the levels of these inflammatory mediators, curcumin can improve systemic inflammation, enhance metabolic function, and potentially alleviate symptoms such as weight gain, fatigue, and skin issues that are often associated with PCOS.

#### 2. Antioxidant Properties

Oxidative stress, caused by an imbalance between reactive oxygen species (ROS) and the body's antioxidant defense mechanisms, is another key contributor to the development of PCOS-related complications [19]. Oxidative stress impairs folliculogenesis, the process by which ovarian follicles mature, and exacerbates insulin resistance. Furthermore, oxidative damage to ovarian tissue can lead to cyst formation, a hallmark feature of PCOS. Curcumin's antioxidant properties are critical in reducing oxidative stress by scavenging ROS and

promoting the activity of endogenous antioxidant enzymes, such as superoxide dismutase (SOD) and glutathione peroxidase (GPx) [20]. Studies have demonstrated that curcumin supplementation helps to reduce oxidative damage in both ovarian tissue and systemic circulation [20,21]. By upregulating the activity of these enzymes, curcumin can protect the ovaries and other tissues from oxidative damage, thereby promoting better ovarian function, reducing the formation of cysts, and improving overall metabolic health in women with PCOS.

#### 3. Insulin Sensitization and Metabolic Regulation

One of the primary features of PCOS is insulin resistance, a condition in which the body's cells become less responsive to insulin, leading to elevated insulin levels and disrupted glucose metabolism [22]. Insulin resistance contributes to hyperandrogenism

(excessive androgen production) and metabolic dysfunction, both of which worsen the symptoms of PCOS. Curcumin has been shown to enhance insulin sensitivity, making it an effective compound for improving glucose metabolism and regulating lipid

profiles in women with PCOS [23]. The compound exerts its effects through the activation of the AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK) pathway. AMPK plays a central role in regulating cellular energy balance, promoting glucose uptake, and modulating lipid metabolism. By activating AMPK, curcumin facilitates better glucose utilization and enhances insulin sensitivity, ultimately improving fasting blood glucose and insulin levels [24]. Several studies

have indicated that curcumin supplementation can reduce insulin resistance, as measured by the homeostatic model assessment of insulin resistance (HOMA-IR), and improve overall metabolic function [22,25]. These metabolic benefits can help manage weight, reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes, and mitigate other associated complications, such as dyslipidemia and obesity that commonly occur in women with PCOS.

#### 4. Modulation of Androgen Synthesis

Hyperandrogenism, or the excessive production of male hormones (androgens) like testosterone, is a hallmark feature of PCOS and contributes to a variety of symptoms, including hirsutism (excessive hair growth), acne, and anovulation (lack of ovulation) [26]. Elevated androgen levels are primarily driven by dysregulated ovarian steroidogenesis. Curcumin has shown promise in modulating androgen synthesis by downregulating the activity of key enzymes involved in the production of androgens [27]. Notably, curcumin inhibits 5 $\alpha$ -reductase, an enzyme

that converts testosterone into its more potent form, dihydrotestosterone (DHT), which is associated with the development of male-pattern hair growth and other androgenic symptoms. Additionally, curcumin affects cytochrome P450 enzymes, which play a role in steroidogenesis, further reducing the production of excess androgens [28]. By modulating these enzymes, curcumin can help lower circulating androgen levels, potentially alleviating symptoms like hirsutism and acne, and promoting a more balanced hormonal profile in women with PCOS.

#### 5. Effects on Ovarian Function and Folliculogenesis

Curcumin's beneficial effects extend to ovarian health, where it helps regulate follicular development and supports normal ovulatory function. In women with PCOS, folliculogenesis is often impaired, resulting in the formation of cysts and the absence of regular ovulation [29]. Animal studies have shown that curcumin can improve ovarian function by promoting follicular maturation and enhancing estrous cyclicity. Additionally, curcumin helps restore normal ovarian morphology by modulating steroidogenesis and supporting the growth and development of ovarian follicles [30]. This improved ovarian function could have significant implications for women with PCOS who are struggling with infertility due to anovulation. By supporting healthier ovarian tissue and encouraging more regular ovulatory cycles, curcumin could serve as a valuable adjunct to fertility treatments and contribute to improved reproductive

outcomes for women with PCOS [31]. In conclusion, curcumin's wide array of pharmacological properties, including its anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, insulin-sensitizing, and androgen-modulating effects, make it a promising candidate for managing the symptoms and underlying pathophysiology of PCOS [32]. Although further clinical research is needed to fully understand its therapeutic potential, curcumin may provide a natural and complementary treatment option for women with PCOS, helping to improve metabolic health, hormonal balance, and ovarian function. As part of a comprehensive management plan, curcumin could offer relief from the chronic inflammation, oxidative stress, and insulin resistance that characterize this complex disorder, ultimately improving the quality of life for women affected by PCOS.

#### Clinical Evidence Supporting Curcumin in PCOS

Emerging clinical trials suggest that curcumin supplementation may offer significant benefits for women with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), particularly in alleviating key symptoms such as menstrual irregularities, insulin resistance, and hyperandrogenism [33]. Some studies have reported promising results, including reductions in serum testosterone levels, which could help manage symptoms like acne and hirsutism. Additionally, curcumin supplementation has been associated with improved ovulation rates, which is critical for women

with PCOS who may struggle with infertility due to anovulation [34,35]. Furthermore, curcumin has shown potential in enhancing metabolic markers, such as improved insulin sensitivity, reduced fasting blood glucose, and better lipid profiles. While these findings are encouraging, it is important to note that more extensive and well-designed randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are needed to validate these results and determine the most effective dosages for optimal therapeutic outcomes.

#### Safety and Considerations

Curcumin is generally considered safe and well-tolerated when taken in commonly used doses. Its safety profile is favorable, with few reported adverse

effects, making it an appealing natural option for women with PCOS seeking alternative treatments [36]. However, curcumin's bioavailability is a known

limitation, meaning that only a small percentage of the compound is absorbed and utilized by the body. To address this issue, formulations that enhance curcumin's absorption, such as curcumin nanoparticles, liposomal curcumin, or co-administration with piperine (a compound found in black pepper), are often recommended [37]. These formulations can significantly increase the bioavailability of curcumin, enhancing its therapeutic

effects. Additionally, while curcumin is generally safe, potential interactions with certain medications should be considered. For instance, curcumin may interact with anticoagulants, such as warfarin, and hypoglycemic agents, which could alter their effects [38,39]. Women taking such medications should consult with their healthcare providers before starting curcumin supplementation.

### Future Directions

To fully understand curcumin's potential in the management of PCOS, future research should focus on large-scale, well-designed clinical trials. These studies should aim to confirm curcumin's efficacy in improving key symptoms and markers of PCOS, determine optimal dosing strategies, and explore its long-term effects. Additionally, investigating curcumin's role when used in combination with other therapeutic agents, such as insulin-sensitizing drugs

or hormonal treatments, may offer a more holistic approach to managing PCOS. Furthermore, exploring curcumin's impact on gut microbiota and its potential to influence epigenetic modifications could provide novel insights into the pathophysiology of PCOS. Such research could pave the way for more targeted treatments and a deeper understanding of how natural compounds like curcumin can contribute to managing complex conditions such as PCOS.

### CONCLUSION

Curcumin presents a promising natural therapeutic option for PCOS due to its anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, insulin-sensitizing, and hormone-modulating properties. While preliminary evidence supports its benefits, further clinical validation is necessary to integrate curcumin into standard PCOS

management protocols. With continued research, curcumin may offer a safe and effective complementary approach to improving metabolic, hormonal, and reproductive outcomes in women with PCOS.

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