Introduction to April Johnson and Functional Medicine

Welcome to this episode of the PCOS SOS Summit. I'm your host, Dr. Felice Gersh. With me for this very interesting episode is April Johnson, who is certified both in applied functional medicine and is an integrative nutrition health coach.

So I'm so excited for her to share lots of pearls and suggestions for every one of you to optimize your health. But first, April, first of all, thank you so much for joining me and tell us a little bit about how you got into this field, what is applied functional medicine, because some out there may never even have heard those words and then we'll do a deep dove into how health coaching can help and some of the different specific suggestions that you can have.

Were women suffering and dealing with PCOS. So tell us all about, you know. Well, first of all, I am very excited to be here and sharing this information with all of these ladies.

And so what got me into where I'm at today, honestly, is my own health journey, which started like 13 years ago. And I dived into learning about the food industry and made changes to my food and lifestyle.

And at that time, looking back, I didn't even realize it then. But I know for a fact I was dealing with health issues. I had gained a lot of weight. I wasn't sleeping well.

I did had I didn't have great digestion either. So as I was making all these changes and going through learning about holistic health and wellness and started noticing how much better I was feeling, I wanted to be able to help others, but I just didn't know what that looks like.

I was like, I want to do this, but I don't know what that is. So I actually had a friend who went through IIN and shared with me what health coaching was all about, and that's what I did.

I enrolled in the IIN and I went throug htheir program and which was a year. And then right after school I had my first client and I was super excited to work with her.

However, the things that she wanted to achieve she was struggling with because she had underlying health issues such as dealing with hypothyroidism and hormonal imbalance.

And so that's when I realized that I really wanted to help women on a much deeper level by addressing the root causes of what was going on with their health issues, which led me to a functional medicine.

And that's where I went through the program at school to play functional medicine. And I went I learned about how to address the root causes of health issues, and that's what applied functional medicine is.

It's addressing the root causes of what is going on with an individual. And so, you know, one of the things, too, that really I as the years have gone on since I've been in this field and learning about function is that I really just gravitated to helping women with hormones and hormone imbalance, because I know this is such a huge issue for so many women.

I know for sure there I was dealing with it myself, and that's what also led me to where I'm at today with natural wellness. Well, you're 100% right. And the issues involving hormonal imbalance and probably the poster child for a hormonal imbalance is PCOS.

So just as sort of a foundational approach, say whether a woman has PCOS or not, say she has just irregular cycles, which is a sure sign of hormonal imbalance in a reproductive age.

Woman What would you even start with for that woman? Like she walks in the door and she says to you, April, my periods are crazy, you know? I never know when they're going to come, how long they're going to last.

Where would you start? Yeah. So there's a lot of places that we could start. I mean, I know one thing that we do, we do testing to just to see where that hormonal imbalance is.

Root Causes, Hormones, and PCOS Basics

And most likely, she's dealing with some progesterone issues, which is very common in PCOS and also on there, probably dealing with in that dynamic as well.

She could also be dealing with, you know, that imbalance between the estrogen progesterone dealing with some high androgens. So, you know, I always like to go back to the basics to helping women.

I always like to address the food. I think food is powerful food is information. And a lot of women that are dealing with some irregularity, too, and especially with the PCOS is, you know, insulin.

And so, you know, working on cleaning up what they're eating, you know, staying away from refined carbs, stay away from sugars and alcohol, and just really focusing on Whole Foods organic as much as possible and you know, just incorporating the protein and fiber.

Also, omega threes are very helpful as well with this. And so, you know, those sources would be like olive oil and salmon. But really, like I said, going back to those basics with food and also we can address lifestyle changes as well.

Now, I know you work as part of a team, a health care team, and would you say that that's really the best way for a health coach to function as part of a a team?

Working as a as a team is is great. I mean, we all have different, you know, modalities. We have all kinds of different experiences and different ways of helping women.

So I think it's really great when we're able to do that and collaborate. And in terms of lab testing, you mentioned that you do testing. So for a woman who comes in and say she was just diagnosed with PCOS and she's a very classic presentation with, say, some acne and hirsutism, you know, the excess facial hair, the irregular cycles and often some difficulty losing weight.

So what kind of lab testing does your group usually look to do? So what we primarily do is a saliva testing and this really gives us a good idea of what is on three hormones and an individual with free and available.

So that is what we recommend for any woman that comes through and wants to meet and work with us is doing a saliva test. And in terms of food choices.

So it's it's really challenging for women who are busy. You know, they say, I don't have time to do all that shopping and preparation. So like, what do you suggest save for if we look at each meal?

First of all, let me start with meals. Like do you recommend any particular number of meals for women with PCOS? Some people try to limit the time that they eat or the number of times they eat.

So what's your approach to how many meals a day or what time you eat that that type of approach? Yeah. So when it comes to meals, I think having those three meals a day is great and very important.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner. And then you're having fasting at the end of the evening after your dinner. And then also when it comes to meals, I say simple is the way to go.

Like it doesn't have to be complicated and just like a good source of protein, like chicken or fish and a good amount

of vegetables, I mean, that's really all you need.

I saw women and some women come to me and are like, well, you know how the eating is so complicated, just so hard. Like, I can't do that. And I'm like, really?

It's very, very simple. Don't have to make it hard at all. Well, let's take a practical example, like the woman I just sort of described. So she says, I am so busy, I have to get off to work in the morning.

I have a half hour commute and I just put a bowl of cereal together. You know, I buy just a commercial brand of cereal often. It's like lightly sweetened, whatever that means.

And then I put it in some milk and then I'm just out the door like, what? What do you suggest to start a healthy day? Like, what? Would you look at a breakfast as an ideal way to start the day?

What kind of a breakfast would you suggest for this woman? Yeah, so protein. Protein, for sure. So, you know, a scramble and some eggs. It's a good source of some type of a sausage and some type of a vegetable or fruit on the side.

I think that would be definitely a much better choice than doing the cereal. And, you know, also what can be very can be and how it's something I also suggest which is meal prepping.

So like you can also make like a quiche or you could do some type of egg dish and make it by like earlier in the week and then you can reheat it in the morning.

That way you had something that you can, you know, prepare, and that way you're not grabbing like that bowl of cereal. Now, I know some people eat like leftover dinner type foods.

So do you try to say who cares what? You know, breakfast foods don't have to be traditional.

PCOS Nutrition: Meals, Breakfast, and Blood Sugar

You could eat any kind of food at any time of day. So get rid of that idea that only certain foods are for breakfast. You kind of say, just let that go. Yes.

Yeah, it's I've always said that, too. Like it doesn't have to be the traditional eggs if you don't want to or sausage. But yeah, it could be a salad.

It could be with protein on it. I mean, it could be anything you want, just as long as you're starting your day with that protein and a good amount of fat and fiber, it's really going to be setting you off for your blood sugar to throughout the day.

Now, I know sometimes at offices of people, you know, more and more actually these are two ways that we could create this. The people who work at home and they're just sitting there at their computer all day and nothing is stopping them from having a bowl of M&M or something like near them.

So we'll start with the person who works from home, because it's always so easy to theoretically say, do this, do that, but it's the enactment of that that people fall down and and just can't sort of stick with the plan.

And that's what I love about health coaching, is that it helps people, you know, with the nitty gritty how to do this, how to actually make the lifestyle changes.

So what do you recommend for people who are just sitting at the computer at home working remotely? And, you know, it's just a little bit repetitious. They may be on Zoom meetings, but a lot of it is just doing their own thing, you know, on the computer.

And it's so easy to mindlessly just snack while you're doing that sort of thing. So what do you how do you help people who are dealing with that sort of mindless snacking while they're working at home?

Yeah. And I can I can truly identify with how that can be because I work from home. And so, you know, and so I totally understand that I'm occasions but if I do feel like I want a snack though I do have like some nuts, some really good organic nuts.

That's really great. That fills me up. And then at times if I feel like I want to have a snack and I really don't need to be eating, I'll just get up from my desk personally, maybe go for a walk and take a break.

But that's what I do also. You know, drinking some water can help sometimes. A lot of times when people are feeling like they're hungry, where they're really not maybe just needs water.

So those are just some of the suggestions that I would make if if somebody was dealing with that. You get involved with any of the teas like green tea.

I know a lot of people talk about green tea as helping to lose weight and have, you know, lots and lots of antioxidants. So do you see a role for green tea?

Is that one of your tools that you utilize. In our green tea is amazing. It can help with PCOS too, can help with hormonal imbalances. It can help with a lot of things.

So yeah, I'm in green tea is amazing and definitely a lot of women like to drink that as well. And I know another one that's popular with PCOS and I don't know if you deal with this one to like spearmint.

Yes, I've heard of that as well. The experiment is wonderful as well. And for women who go to an office sometimes they have like they bring in donuts.

I can tell you in my office sometimes it's not as much as in the old days, but we have reps from different types of reps, you know, could be pharmaceutical reps, it could be a lab laboratory.

And they, they're trying to be nice, but they bring in like a big box of cookies or donuts or danishes, you know, how do you help people to just deal with temptations that sometimes surround them?

Yeah, that's a really hard one that I've had many women come and tell me that, you know, saying no to those things is hard and so, you know, you know, just watching them, sharing with them and letting them know, like what those types of foods are going to be doing to them.

They're not healthy, obviously. You know, one of the things that I recommended to many women when they work in an environment like that is to bring their own stuff.

So I guess people are eating something like that, maybe where they're bringing their own food that's more healthier. They won't feel like you're out of place when everybody else is kind of enjoying those types of foods.

But then I think also they feel like they made a much better decision when they bring their own food and they're eating their own healthy food versus eating like that, don't it? Or cupcake.

Yeah. That also reminds me of those drinks that they all can bring in, like different kinds of like frappuccinos and things. I guess that's where you can sometimes tell people to bring and store their own tea so that they're not like outsiders.

Like, you know, it's so hard. And maybe you could share like when a lot of the majority of women that are probably listening with PCOS are young women who go out, you know, sometimes with friends for a happy hour or socialization social events and everyone is drinking or they're they're having pizza or burgers and fries and so on.

How do you navigate that type of scenario? Because people feel like, oh, you know, I'll be embarrassed if I say I can't eat the the burger and fries and pizza like you.

I'm just going to order lettuce or something. Like how do you navigate those social situations? Yeah. So, you know, when it comes to say alcohol, you know, there's mocktails so you don't feel out of place.

You can always order a mocktail, I mean, when it comes to the food. And I think one of the things I also like to let women know is like, you know, it can't always be a 100%, you know, on point and that's okay.

So like if sometimes you're out with your friends and you want to enjoy a slice of pizza, you can do that. But, you know, ordering some type of healthy protein with it, like a vegetable or some fish or something like that is, you know, something another option that they can do.

And like soda, now we know that either are artificially sweetened or naturally, if you can call it natural, like high fructose corn sirup, that's not natural, you know, so, you know, soda is so prevalent in our society.

So do you have advice for women in general about how to handle the ubiquitous soda?

Managing Snacks, Drinks, and Social Temptations

Oh, goodness. Yeah. So I was a huge soda drinker myself. Diet Coke was my thing really long ago. And so, honestly, what I have done is I replaced that with carbonated waters, waver carbonated waters.

They give me that carbonation that I absolutely love without all of the junk that's in a soda. And there are some healthier options with stevia. Some women like to use that.

Just be careful with that a little bit. But stevia is always an option. But for me personally, like I said, I share this with other women. Like those carbonated seltzer waters are amazing and that's what I enjoy in place of a soda.

No, me too. When it comes to food preparation, there's always a lot of questions about oils, like what do you cook with? So what do you recommend for your PCOS patients as far as preparation of food with oils?

Do you say skip the oils altogether, cook things in broth or water? Do you recommend a particular type of oil? Like what's your feeling about oils? Because this comes up all the time in terms of food prep.

Well, when it comes to oils, extra virgin olive oil is great organic. I would definitely take that, but I probably wouldn't use any other type of oils even.

Oh is perfect almonds. You could use broth if you wanted to. You could use water too. But for me, I really like the extra virgin olive oil. Oh, I do too.

And in terms of keeping track, do you recommend any sort of journaling? Do you recommend calorie counting or just like looking at like the plate, do you recommend using small plates?

Some people talk about, you know, just have a smaller plate or just, you know, fill the plate with different, you know, half the plate with this and quarter to the plate.

So in terms of people deciding how much to because so so many women with PCOS don't know about portion so there's so confused like what is a normal portion?

What do I actually do to decide when to stop eating, how much to put on my plate? What kind of a plate you had? So I do believe in the smaller plate and the big place.

We can load a lot more food than we really need to on there. And I don't count calories. I think that I used to do that and mentally was not a big thing.

So I don't really suggest counting calories. Not really necessary to either. If you're eating a really healthy meal. And so what we aim for and then like in terms of protein, we always want to try to like a 4.7 grams to one gram of protein per ideal weight.

And that's really good, gives you a really good idea of how much grams to eat and a day. And then that's what you would put on your plate three times a day.

And then also on top of that, I would just do the rest of the plate with some vegetables. And you know, also when it comes to eating, know when to stop, when feeling full.

It takes about 15 minutes for the brain and the gut to connect. So you may not feel quite full yet, but for me, I know I actually stop and then I'll give myself like that 10 to 15, many 10 to 15 minutes, and I feel full.

And, you know, the rest of that food I will save and put in for leftovers. Yeah, that's great advice because I know so many people eat so fast, they're just like gobble down their food and then they don't even remember eating.

So and it hasn't really clicked in their brain that they have eaten. So, you know, the idea of a leisurely meal where you actually chew your food is so important.

I know. And yet so many people lead such hectic lives. So like you try to emphasize, like at least some of your meals to sit down. I mean, do you talk about some people talk about like don't eat standing up.

You have to sit down and you have to count how many times you chew. Do you get into that at all or you think that's like more than people can handle? Right. Well, I think it's important to discuss because I do believe that a lot of people are on the go, go, go.

Right. And they don't really prioritize eating. And I think it's important to sit down and have a meal and to really be mindful of what you're eating and to chew thoroughly.

I've seen so many people, choo choo choo swallow. And that is, you know, that's going to affect their digestive system. So the act of just slowing down, which I know is not always an easy thing for people, but to sit down and slow down and be very intentional about what you're about to put in your mouth and chewing thoroughly and swallowing is very, very, very important.

Well, that's great advice. And in terms of vegetables, you mentioned vegetables, do you have any preference for cooked versus raw vegetables like a salad, how to prepare them like steamed them, roast them, bake them?

You know, sometimes people talk about, oh, you lose nutrients if you cook it in a certain way and it's better. Do you think that's even like important to emphasize or like, let's just get you eating vegetables?

I don't care how you cook them. But I'm one who doesn't eat vegetable like at all. I like, however they can get them in is great, but I am honestly against microwaving anything.

I actually don't even have one in my house anymore. I use an election oven instead. And so, you know, that's one way or another way of steaming. Steaming is great. I also roast my as well.

So I actually do like whole different types of vegetables. But anyway, any, any way that they can get them in is going to be great to get started. But you know, my favorite honestly is, is roasted vegetables with olive oil.

But I also love roasted root vegetables. And now you mentioned an air fryer. So there are certain appliances that can save time. So maybe you can touch on like because I'm so concerned about women not just having knowledge but actually utilizing it on a day to day basis so that they actually implement all this knowledge.

Portions, Eating Mindfully, and Cooking Tips

So you mentioned like an air fryer, so maybe you could touch on how can they utilize a very common and very useful cooking device like that or these like rapid pressure cookers that are out now and how that can help, you know, maybe like time saving, ease of cooking, like these are like the practical ways to actually get into utilizing, you know, the healthy knowledge that you have about food and then use it in your daily life.

So maybe like what devices, cooking devices and tools do you recommend? So, I mean, we have the convection oven, which is great. We also do have an air fryer.

And what you are is the food ninja, which it has everything, but it has a pressure cooker, which I will honestly say is probably one of the best things ever invented.

You can put in any type of a protein in there and pressure cook it and it will see your whole lot of time because if you do it like an oven, it's going to take you like most of the day.

Sometimes you said, in fact, some types of these proteins, but I love doing protein in a pressure cooker. The air fryer is great to you can seasoning your vegetables or season whatever you want to put in there and then set the timer and it's done in a short period of time.

Another thing I like to do, Haagen Eggs, they're wonderful. They're great for a snack, healthy protein. You can actually do that in the pressure cooker, too.

It take the 5 minutes to do a dozen eggs. Great. And another thing that we also that I also like to use is like a double boiler for steaming vegetables.

So those are kind of the tools and pots and pans and things that we use in our own kitchen. Well, it sounds like that could save hours of cooking time and then it takes away that excuse of I don't have time to cook like.

Exactly, exactly. And you've mentioned spices, so a lot of people don't know anything about spices. Are there any particular like for people who are not cooks?

And a lot of a lot of people don't know how to cook at all because even their growing up years, their parents went and did takeout food because they were busy.

So they lived on prepared foods and takeout foods and no one ever gave them cooking lessons. So what are some basic spices that you think the the novice cook maybe could utilize without, like making too many mistakes and having to throw out the dish because they don't like the way it tastes.

JET Yeah, and so salt and I use prefer like Celtic sea salt or Himalayan salt not like your regular table salt, but a good source of salt pepper. Another one that I also like to use, like garlic powder or onion powder and what else?

Do it now. I don't know how. And you got to be careful though, with that one, but I do like to make my things a little bit busy, but I honestly doesn't like the staples, the salt, pepper, onion and garlic powder.

And also maybe some, like Italian seasoning is really great. That's one of my favorite go tos as well. Yeah, I like that. You mentioned that because there are companies that make blends, they're just pre-made for you, you know, like I have one Herbs of Provence and I don't know, I'm not sure what's in it, but it tastes really good and I didn't have to figure it out, you know, like what they blended in that.

So that's a great idea. Look for the blends that are already out there for you so you don't have to think a little how much basil, how much time, how much rosemary or whatever.

Yeah. So that's good. So even the novice cook can make tasty dishes slowly. They can make tasty dishes. And, you know, healthy eating does not have to be boring.

So I always say seasoned it up, spice it up. Do you usually recommend they go online and get recipes or do you

provide them or do you suggest certain cookbooks or the like?

You know, there's so much available. So where do you usually tell your novice cooks to start. By going online? There is so many recipes out there and I have to share with them.

There are some sites that I like, like simply recipes is one of them. Their recipe critic is another one. I have like some other ones and then I share with them.

But there is a lot of really great recipes out there. So and then I think to what I tell them is like if you go online and you find recipes that you like, like bookmark them and save them so that you can go back and make those meals again.

Now, make things easier and, and over time you'll build this, this list. So mine is huge at this point. I don't have a lot of recipes that I can pull from all the time, which is great, but kind of keeps it not so boring, you know, in the at the meals in the kitchen.

Yeah, it is really hard when people make the same two things every day, right. Like you try to emphasize a little variety. Yeah. And variety that is very important.

You're going to get very bored if you're eating the same thing, right, all the time. So definitely, you know, switch it up trying some new recipes, you know.

And you know, one of the things too, that I also do is I kind of alter recipes to kind of my liking. So and that's always that's always an option, too.

And we touched on a little bit like the idea that, you know, it's hard to to avoid food. It's like everywhere. And a lot of it is very unhealthy. And a lot of times women, especially women with PCOS, have a lot of stress and they have stress eating.

So as a health coach, do you talk about how to manage stress at all? And so that's that's a really big one. And, you know, everyone deals with stress for sure in this world that we live in and and especially with women with PCOS and having a hormonal imbalance.

So some things that I do suggest for helping with stress, one of the biggest ones I love is deep breathing and it is a game changer and it's very simple in you just breathe in, hole in and exhale and it will change everything.

Like your whole nervous system changes. And also, you know, gratitude, journaling is great, grounding is great as well. So those are just some of the suggestions that I make for women just to help with dealing with some stress in their life.

And I imagine all of those techniques can help with falling asleep because that is another issue. A lot of women with PCOS say I'm a night owl. I just sort of get more energy at night, which is not too helpful when you should be going to sleep.

So do you also apply all of that not just to stress eating, but also to trying to relax and go to sleep? So those things that I mentioned are going to help, but also following that, you know, being in the sunlight in the morning, making sure at night we are calming the body down, calming the mind down, something that I suggest to help us sleep is blue light blockers.

Stress, Sleep, Movement, and Support Systems

If you have to be on a device or if you can detach from a device for a few hours, that can be very helpful. So again, so those are just some suggestions that I make for sleep.

And in terms of movement or fitness, where do you start with someone who is sitting at a computer all day long,

whether in the office or at home, and they may be £25 overweight and they'd have kind of low energy.

They're not sleeping and eating really optimally. Where do you start with fitness and exercise? Just take a walk or do you recommend they get a trainer or where do you usually start with your clients?

And so just getting up and moving out, honestly, walking is probably one of the best things anybody can do, at least to get started. When you go outside and you're going for a walk and you're getting that nature and you're getting that fresh air, it I know for me it makes me feel a lot better and gives me a little bit of some energy.

So starting with walking is going to be the best thing I can do. And then also I think some strength training is good too, and that's going to help with partial helping with the weight loss of just looking to do some of that, but also just strengthening up their muscles.

And that also can help with metabolism. Oh, absolutely. And I'm sure would sleep and stress as well Absolutely I like your idea earlier where you said, like, if you feel like you're going to do some crazy snacking at your desk, get up and take a walk, maybe.

You know, that's part of your plan is just like even 5 minutes of walking is better than 5 minutes of sitting. A lot of people are working from home now.

So people are, you know, sitting a lot more. And so, you know, I like to set myself a break like I get myself at least a ten or 15 minute break in the morning and then the afternoon.

And I like to get up and go for a walk outside, but not so just getting away from my desk and moving my body in some way. Sometimes I also like to do wall pilates.

That's something that I've just recently got started in, but some type of movement throughout the day. Absolutely. And one more thing I would love to hear your input on is women who live in a family, like whether it's their they're still living in sort of a larger family environment with parents or siblings or they have a spouse or roommate who is not following the healthy lifestyle principles that you've been talking about.

And it feels like at every turn they have junk food out everywhere, their sabotaging by saying, hey, let's go out for ice cream cones. Like, how do you help people deal with the reality of the people they live with who are maybe unintentionally sort of sabotaging them.

Really hard one, you know, when you don't have like family members that are on board with what you're trying to do, you know, I like to just tell them that you need to just have that on open and honest conversation with your loved one or your spouse and just letting them know like, Hey, this is where I'm at, this is what I'm working on.

I would like your support and I feel like a lot of times when women have that kind of conversation with their loved ones, that their loved ones would be supportive and helping them.

So they would be, you know, more in gears, maybe trying to follow maybe a little bit more of the lifestyle that they would like, what they they're living.

It seems like having a health coach is like really the lifeline that maybe these women need to keep them from sinking under the weight of their family and friends who are, you know, not necessarily on board with with their goals, even though, you know, theoretically they should be, but in reality they're not.

So maybe that's like another incredible value of a health coach is that that is the one person who is always there supporting your health. Goals. Absolutely, I mean, I am for every person that I work with, I my thing is I am there for them.

I'm supported, I'm an ear. I listen. And sometimes a lot of women, too, they just want to be heard and they want to just, you know, speak and be heard.

So it's it's that for health coach really does they're they're basically they're cheerleader, you know, and they're there to support them 100% in achieving their their health goals.

Well, I am 100% in favor of health coaching and the value that it adds into helping every woman with PCOS to achieve her, her goals and for all the the viewers out there who are saying, I want a health coach, I want someone just like you, April.

So what would they do? And like if they want to follow you and they want to learn more from you, what what can they do? You know, you can go to check me out with Dr.

Michelle and nurse of her amazing coaches. We also had Doctors Naturopathic Physicians and also RN for her staff and her team. But you could go to fixhormones.com to check us out and another thing is if you want to follow me, I am on Instagram.

So: apriljohnson_FMHC is where you can personally find me. But the best way I think to contacting it would be that it's fixhormones.com. Oh, that sounds great because fixing hormones is definitely a goal of every woman with PCOS.

That is for sure. So thank you so much, April. I can't believe how many really critically important suggestions you gave in the last, you know, 40 minutes.

It's incredible. I think everyone's going to want to listen to this two or three times to make sure they get it all down, because what a wealth of great suggestions.

Thank you so much for joining me. Thank you for having me. It was great.