

## **METABOLIC SYNDROME**

### **A Resource from the American College of Preventive Medicine**

#### **A Guide for Patients**

#### **Why You've Got to Take it Seriously Right Now**

One in three adults in the U.S. now have a condition called the Metabolic Syndrome; over age 60, nearly half have it. But it doesn't even sound like a real disease. How bad can it be?

The Metabolic Syndrome is not a specific disease -- it's a syndrome, and that's the issue. Syndromes are combinations of specific physical conditions and symptoms that occur together, and are related to each other. In the case of the Metabolic Syndrome, they are related to disorders in metabolism – how our body transforms food into energy.

#### **Reasons to take the Metabolic Syndrome Seriously**

The result of this underlying disorder are multiple – blood sugar goes up, insulin levels rise, triglycerides and bad fats in the blood increase, good cholesterol goes down, blood becomes thicker making clots more likely to form, blood pressure goes up and blood vessels become inflamed. This is bad news because all of these are risk factors for cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death in our country. And, the more risk factors you have, the greater the risk.

With the Metabolic Syndrome, your risk for a heart attack, stroke, or early death is twice that of a person without the syndrome. *This is the first reason to take it seriously!*

The Metabolic Syndrome frequently leads to diabetes. If you have it, you are five times as likely to develop diabetes as someone without the syndrome. Diabetes is a devastating disease. It damages blood vessels, endangers eyesight, causes kidney failure and even leads to foot amputations. *This is the second reason to take the Metabolic Syndrome very seriously!*

#### **So, why do we get the Metabolic Syndrome?**

The syndrome develops because of a conflict between our genes and our lifestyle. Our genes have developed over thousands of years to favor fat storage because food was never guaranteed. People had to be able to survive food shortages. Our body became very efficient at putting on fat. We no longer have food shortages. We have plenty of food, especially processed, packaged and "fast" foods that are high in calories, fat and sugar. Our genes also developed to support a very active lifestyle of physical work and lots of movement. Today we spend most of our waking hours sitting – at work, in the car, watching TV, at the computer.

This combination of over-consumption and under-active is the recipe for the Metabolic Syndrome – weight gain. Fat cells expand and become more active in metabolism (not good), and muscle cells shrink and become less active (also not good).

But not everyone who gains weight gets the Metabolic Syndrome. Why is this?

Genes play an important role. They keep some overweight people from getting the syndrome, but they also cause the syndrome to develop in others with little weight gain. But, there is one other very important factor that determines who will get the syndrome.

**Not all fat is created equal, especially concerning the Metabolic Syndrome.**

The other factor is where we put on weight. Fat that accumulates in the belly is the problem. Upper body fat is far worse, metabolically, than lower body fat. Fat cells in the abdominal area are closely linked to the liver, which also plays an important role in metabolism. As these fat cells expand, they release more fat, hormones and other substances into the blood. This begins the cascade of problems that become the Metabolic Syndrome.

**How does the doctor know if I have the Metabolic Syndrome?**

To diagnose the metabolic syndrome, your doctor measures your waistline, good cholesterol level, blood pressure, triglycerides, and blood sugar. The diagnosis is made if you have abnormal levels of any three of these five criteria. Other abnormalities occur, but these five are the simplest to obtain and most valid indicators of the syndrome.

**There is some good news ... but only if you really do take the Syndrome seriously.**

The Metabolic Syndrome is treatable. In fact, it's often entirely reversible.

BUT, there's a catch ... you are the only one who has the power to reverse it. No one can do it for you. There is no drug that will do it. The only way to reverse the syndrome is to change your lifestyle – eat healthier and increase your physical activity to help you lose some weight around the middle. And, of course, quit smoking if you still smoke.

If you are unable to make these changes, your doctor will prescribe medicines. Some people need to take medicine in addition to making lifestyle changes. But you will need fewer medicines and lower dosages if you make the lifestyle changes too.

**So, what do I need to do to reverse the Syndrome?**

First, become more active.

- Moderate daily exercise is the key. A brisk 30 minute walk every day is a good goal. You'll have to plan your walks at first, but after a month or so it will become a habit, something you look forward to each day.
- If you cannot do 30 minutes, do whatever you can. Just commit to doing some walking every day. Some find that a walking partner or using a pedometer helps.
- Try to walk a little faster than your usual pace. Once in a while go a little longer.

Second, make some changes in your eating habits.

- A "Mediterranean" diet has been shown to help with weight loss and the Metabolic Syndrome. This means:
- Fewer bad fats (saturated and trans fats – red meat, whole dairy, packaged foods, fast food) and more good fats (monounsaturated, like olive oil)
- More fiber rich "good" carbohydrates (fruits, vegetables and whole grains), and fewer "bad" carbohydrates (refined grains, sugar sweetened snacks, starches, soft drinks),
- More protein from legumes (beans and peas) and less from meat (substituting fish and chicken for red meat when meat is consumed)

Third, focus on losing fat weight.

- Means slow and steady – no more than 1-2 pounds per week,
- No fad diets, just control your portions, limit snacking, eat breakfast, don't let yourself get famished, have healthy snacks available.

**The Bottom Line**

The big thing to understand about the Metabolic Syndrome is that it is progressive, and that it has many fronts; it is a series of problems that are moving toward both diabetes and heart disease. It is slowly, but steadily, stealing your health and your quality of your life.

If you wait until either diabetes or heart disease is diagnosed, a lot of damage will have already been done. Being told that you have the syndrome should be a wake-up call that bad things are on the way unless changes are made. You have the power to change it, and your doctor and his or her team will help.

Take the Metabolic Syndrome seriously. Change your lifestyle and change your fate.

For other information and useful links, visit the American College of Preventive Medicine website at [www.acpm.org](http://www.acpm.org).