



Holistic Family Practice

The Metabolic Syndrome

This condition boils down to one concept: insulin resistance (thus, its alternative name, Insulin Resistance Syndrome). When we eat sugar (or carbohydrates), your body produces insulin from your pancreas to help metabolize those carbs. Your body tissues then take up these carbs-insulin packages and process the sugar.

With inappropriate weight gain, the excess fat tissue alters this process, and your body no longer metabolizes carbohydrates properly - as if it isn't as responsive to insulin. Thus, "insulin resistance". This leads to "pre-diabetes", a real medical term, as well as inflammation of your blood vessels, which can lead to high blood pressure, and ultimately, heart disease and other vascular conditions (stroke, etc).

Metabolic Syndrome is defined as having three of the following five conditions: 1) a high fasting glucose level, 2) a high triglyceride level (fatty acids that are incorporated into cholesterol), 3) a low HDL level ("good cholesterol" - the higher the better), 4) high blood pressure, and 5) a large waistline (>40 inches for men, >35 inches for women).

There is some academic debate over the significance of this term, but regardless of whether you consider the Metabolic Syndrome as an entity, or its independent parts, the end result is increased risk for heart disease, stroke, and the like, even *without* the actual diagnosis of diabetes or other problems that usually mandate direct medical treatment.

So how do we address this problem? Sure, medications help. But they're not as effective as weight loss and exercise. It's a paradox - it is good news and bad news. The good news: you're in control - lifestyle changes are the ultimate solution. The bad news: you're in control - habits are hard to break and reshape, and it *is* harder work than "popping a pill".

But I have more good news. Many people feel frustrated that they don't lose more weight after making some attempt to do so, whether by exercising or eating differently. But research shows that even with *no* weight loss whatsoever, exercise reduces your risk for heart disease. Thus, I always emphasize the proactive, positive approach: exercise! Don't worry so much about whether you lose weight and how much - just exercise! Once you get this habit into place, the weight usually will come off as a by-product, especially as eating habits take their effect as well.

So get to it! Get moving and exercise. Find ways to enjoy being active, be creative in finding time to exercise - it's less time consuming than you might think (see my handouts on an exercise prescription)! Be sure to get your rest - fatigue plays a large part in your discipline and your motivation to continue exercising and eating healthier. And of course, be aware that the larger the change that is needed, the more likely you are to "fall off the wagon" more often or more harshly. But that's ok - get back on that wagon, and get going again - there's no shame in getting back up from being knocked down, only in staying down. As they say at Home Depot, "You can do it; we can help!"