

# Metabolic Syndrome

**A**n estimated 76 million Americans have metabolic syndrome—nearly 35% of the U.S. population older than the age of 20. What is metabolic syndrome, and is there a chance you have it?

Also called *syndrome X* or *insulin resistance syndrome*, metabolic syndrome is a condition that seems to have arisen as a consequence of the increased incidence of obesity in the world today. However, according to the Metabolic Syndrome Institute, scientists began studying this cluster of symptoms more than 60 years ago. The various names used to describe it started popping up in the late 1980s, but the most common term, metabolic syndrome, was created by the World Health Organization in 1998 to describe “a combination of any three of the following symptoms: high blood pressure, high

blood glucose, high cholesterol or triglycerides, and/or a waist circumference greater than 40 inches for men and 35 inches for women,” says Lona Sandon, MEd, RD, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association.

Being diagnosed with any one of these conditions should be enough to make you stand up and take notice. They all put you at a greater risk for stroke, heart attack, or diabetes. But the combination of three or more is staggeringly more significant. In fact, men with metabolic syndrome are almost three times as likely to develop coronary heart disease and other cardiovascular diseases as are those without it, and women are about twice as likely. And having metabolic syndrome increases one’s risk of developing type 2 diabetes by seven times.



How do you know whether you have or are at risk for developing metabolic syndrome? Look at the four conditions previously listed. Have you been diagnosed with any? If you answer “yes” for at least three, talk to your healthcare provider. Although treatments are available, many people go undiagnosed and therefore do not get appropriate care.

To help you avoid metabolic syndrome, Rachel Brandeis, MS, RD, recommends choosing from the more healthful options:

## Avoid

### Refined Grains

- White bread
- White rice
- Regular pasta

### Saturated Fats

- Full-fat dairy products

### Trans Fats

- Baked goods with hydrogenated fats

## Enjoy

### Whole Grains

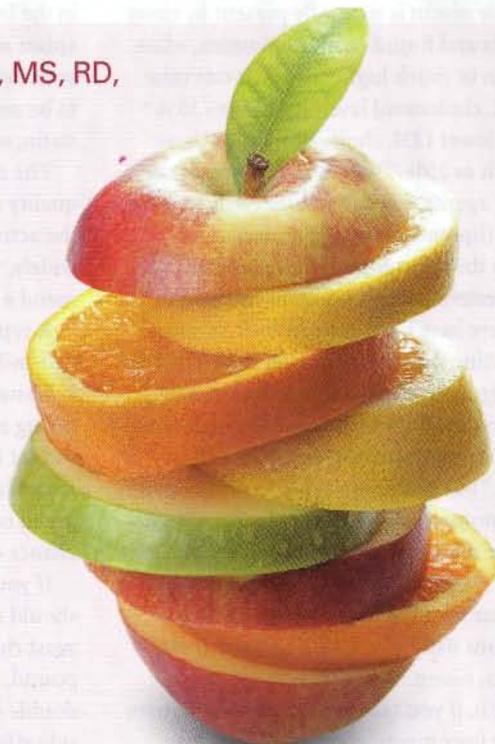
- 100% whole wheat bread
- Oats
- Whole wheat pasta

### Monounsaturated and Polyunsaturated Fatty Acids

- Olive or canola oil
- Nut butters
- Avocados

### Lean Protein

- Low-fat or nonfat milk
- Yogurt
- Eggs
- Nuts
- Fish
- Skinless chicken



If you see a healthcare provider and your test results are normal, don't minimize the importance of waist circumference. Excess weight, especially abdominal body fat, is a big risk factor for developing metabolic syndrome. Sandon notes, "As body fat, particularly tummy fat, increases, it produces hormones and other substances that block its ability to use glucose and other nutrients correctly." So break out a tape measure and perform this test right in your own home.

Whether you have metabolic syndrome or are trying to prevent it, the first line of defense is basically the same: diet and exercise. "Studies show that diet and exercise have complementary roles in the treatment of metabolic syndrome and work better together than each alone," says Rachel Brandeis, MS, RD, an Atlanta-based dietitian specializing in patients with metabolic syndrome. In addition, she explains, many doctors prescribe an insulin-sensitizing medication to help improve blood sugar levels.

Nutritionwise, treating metabolic syndrome is similar to treating any of these conditions individually. Start by modifying the amounts of key nutrients and foods, including various types of fat, whole grains, sugar, and sodium, in your diet. Brandeis says, "I put a lot of emphasis on switching refined grains to whole grains, increasing monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats, decreasing saturated and trans fats, as well as increasing lean protein."

In addition, eliminate soda and other sugar-filled drinks. And to help stay off the blood sugar/hunger roller coaster, go no more than four hours between meals during waking hours. You'll probably need one or two snacks a day, so choose those that combine high fiber and a lean protein, such as fruit and yogurt or whole grain crackers and reduced-fat cheese.

All this talk about food doesn't mean exercise isn't important. Brandeis calls it a "free drug," meaning regular exercise affects your body in much the same way

as do many medicines used to treat high cholesterol and elevated blood sugar but without the expense or side effects.

If exercise isn't part of your weekly routine, it's time for a change. That doesn't mean you need to spend hours every week at the gym. Start out small, such as by taking a brisk 10-minute walk three times per week. Once that's a habit and becomes easier, walk for 15 or 20 minutes and then increase the number of days you exercise. Work yourself up to being active for at least 30 minutes five days a week or more. Also, change things up a bit to prevent boredom—walk one day, bike another, do some yard work or heavy housework on yet another.

"Consistent cardiovascular exercise can help lower insulin resistance, which makes it easier to lose excess weight and helps the diet work better," says Brandeis. ♦

—Heidi Reichenberger McIndoo,  
MS, RD, LDN