

Metabolic syndrome is a complex medical condition that involves multiple related diseases including obesity, elevated blood sugars, high blood pressure (hypertension) and high cholesterol (hyperlipidemia, hypercholesterolemia, hypertriglyceridemia). People with metabolic syndrome are at increased risk for developing many serious medical complications including type 2 diabetes, heart attack (myocardial infarction), stroke (cerebrovascular disease), and if not addressed, even early death. Unfortunately, people living with mental illness are at increased risk for developing metabolic syndrome. Due to the severity of this condition, early detection and intervention are critically important.

Who is at risk for developing metabolic syndrome?

People with mental illness are more likely than other individuals to develop this complex medical condition. Scientific research has shown that certain people are at an even greater risk of having metabolic syndrome. These include people with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and depression; African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and Asian Americans; smokers and chronic drug or alcohol abusers; people with a family history of diabetes and metabolic syndrome; and people who take second-generation (atypical) antipsychotic medications (SGAs).

How can metabolic syndrome and diabetes be prevented?

As metabolic syndrome and diabetes are a complex combination of medical illnesses, there are multiple precautions that can be taken to prevent these severe conditions. In general, maintaining a healthy lifestyle is one of the best preventative measures against developing metabolic syndrome.

A healthy lifestyle includes regular checkups with one's primary care physician. People at high risk for developing metabolic syndrome or diabetes will likely have their weight measured at each visit, along with a measurement of their waist circumference. Certain blood tests (e.g., blood glucose, lipid panel) that evaluate the body's ability to process sugars and fats may also be checked regularly.

It is important to eat a healthy diet that is low in salt and fat, includes regular servings of fruits and vegetables, as well as vitamin supplementation when appropriate. Regular exercise, which can consist of daily walking, running or other form of aerobic exercise, is helpful in the prevention of metabolic syndrome. It is also critical to limit alcohol, drug and nicotine use, as these substances can change the way that the body digests (and metabolizes) food.

Choosing appropriate medications with one's physicians can be critical in preventing metabolic syndrome and diabetes. Given the complexities of these decisions—specifically,

weighing the risks of metabolic syndrome against the benefits of continuing a medication that appears to be working well—all medication management issues should be discussed with one’s family, psychiatrist and other treating physicians. Some people who are taking SGAs may also find that medications used in the treatment of diabetes (e.g., metformin) may be helpful in preventing metabolic syndrome. This is a possible treatment option that can be discussed with one’s psychiatrist and other physicians.

How are metabolic syndrome and diabetes treated?

Treating metabolic syndrome and diabetes involves many of the same strategies used for preventing these conditions. This includes regular doctor appointments, eating a healthy diet, exercising and avoiding smoking, alcohol and other drugs.

In addition to these “life-style modifications” and regular medical follow up, there are medications that are helpful in treating metabolic syndrome and diabetes. These include medications to treat high blood pressure (antihypertensives), medications to treat high cholesterol (including statins such as simvastatin [Zocor] and atorvastatin [Lipitor]) and medications to treat diabetes (including insulin as well as other medications such as metformin). Most primary care physicians are well trained in diagnosing and managing metabolic syndrome and diabetes. However, some people with severe metabolic syndrome and diabetes may also seek a consultation or referral to an endocrinologist.

How do you become your own self advocate?

Scientific studies have shown that a significant portion of people with schizophrenia are not even getting the basic screening tests for these conditions to try and prevent them. It is important to facilitate communication between one’s psychiatrists and other doctors. This can help to make sure that everyone receives appropriate medical and psychiatric care to prevent—and if necessary to treat—these serious conditions.

To learn more about becoming your own *medical self-advocate* by exploring the Medical Self Advocacy section of the NAMI Hearts & Minds website at www.nami.org/heartsandminds.

Some websites that may also be helpful, with the support and collaboration of one’s doctors, are Peertrainer (www.peertrainer.com), Weight Watchers (www.weightwaters.com), In Shape (www.mfs.org/inshape.htm) and The American Diabetes Association (www.diabetes.org).

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