

Do you suffer from Syndrome X?



This deadly condition easily leads to diabetes and heart disease.

By Peggy J. Noonan — April 25, 2004

The No. 1 health problem in America is not heart disease or cancer, say a growing number of experts. **It's Syndrome X.**

In this syndrome, the sum is greater than the parts. Anyone who has several common metabolic problems -- including being overweight or having high blood pressure, high insulin levels or abnormal cholesterol -- is at higher risk of diabetes, heart disease and stroke. Separately, each metabolic problem is a risk factor for other diseases. Together, they multiply the chances of life-threatening illness.

The latest studies report that Syndrome X nearly **doubles** stroke risk, more than **doubles** kidney disease risk and may be linked to Alzheimer's disease. People with Syndrome X are at increased risk of developing diseases that can lead to amputation, heart bypass, kidney disease, blindness and some cancers.

In fact, it's the top killer of Americans. "Deaths from Syndrome X swamp deaths from all other causes," says Stephen Holt, M.D., the author of two books about the syndrome. "It's killing the nation. We're on the brink of disaster."

Here's what you need to know about it.

How to tell if you have it

Doctors say insulin resistance is the common link in Syndrome X; in fact, they sometimes call it insulin resistance syndrome or metabolic syndrome.

Normally, our bodies use a hormone called insulin, which is made in the pancreas, to deliver the glucose (sugars) we get from food to our muscles and fat cells, where it is used as fuel.

In insulin resistance, the body makes plenty of insulin but doesn't recognize it -- so it keeps making more. Soon, the blood is packed with too much insulin and too much sugar. **That double whammy causes inflammation and damages the lining of the arteries and other parts of the body.** Over time, insulin resistance can develop into full-blown Type 2 diabetes.

It's smart to ask your doctor to check your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar. Why not test for insulin resistance? According to leading experts, the only test that directly measures insulin resistance is a research lab procedure not available in most doctors' offices.

Your body shape puts you at risk

"Apple" and "pear" are terms to describe body shape. Pears store fat below the waist. Apples store fat above the waist.

If you're an apple (specifically, if your waist measures at least 40 inches for men, 35 inches for women), you may well be among the millions of Americans who have Syndrome X, which can lead to diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease and stroke.

But there's a super-easy self-test. A new study has confirmed that using a measuring tape is the best way to determine whether people have Syndrome X. In the study, when a **man's waist was bigger than 40 inches** and a **woman's was bigger than 35**, those people had a **very high probability of having Syndrome X**.

In addition, you are at risk if you:

- **Don't exercise.**
- **Are over 40.**
- **Have a personal or family history of diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease or high cholesterol.**
- Are African-American (twice the average risk), Hispanic (triple the risk), or a Pacific Islander or Native American (four times the risk).
- Weighed 9 pounds or more at birth (or gave birth to a 9-pound or bigger baby).
- Are a woman with polycystic ovarian syndrome.

If you have several of those risks, but your family doctor doesn't bring up Syndrome X, **don't be surprised**, says R. Keith Campbell, a certified diabetes educator and associate dean at Washington State University College of Pharmacy. He explains that **our health-care system is set up to focus on acute care rather than chronic illnesses. Plus, studies show that, on average, physicians have had only four hours of diabetes lectures, and they may not have found time to study the latest on Syndrome X, an evolving field.**

If your doctor doesn't take your concerns seriously, Campbell suggests seeing an endocrinologist, a specialist in hormone-linked diseases such as diabetes and obesity. You may have to wait for an appointment: Endocrinologists are in short supply and are expected to become more scarce.

How to beat it

Diet and exercise are the keys. Roughly half of the cases of insulin resistance are caused by those two factors -- 25% by overeating and 25% by not exercising. A study found that people who did some aerobic-type exercise that caused them to sweat a little for 30 minutes three times a week cut their risk of going from pre-diabetic (Syndrome X) to full-blown diabetes by nearly 60%. In addition, exercise and weight loss can help lower blood pressure and cholesterol.

If you smoke, stop -- or at least cut back. Studies show smoking promotes insulin resistance.

Your doctor can help control the individual components of Syndrome X. That could include a daily aspirin to **reduce the inflammation** and "sticky blood" caused by insulin resistance, statin drugs for cholesterol or ACE inhibitors for blood pressure.

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