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At risk of Syndrome X

Syndrome X is a disorder known in medical circles to be associated with conditions that lead to increased risk of atherosclerotic disease. ANNIE FREEDA CRUZ explains who is at risk and steps to prevent it.



Healthy eating habits help to prevent metabolic syndrome.



Vytialingam says metabolic syndrome is recognised as a cluster of conditions that occurs together to increase heart attacks, strokes or diabetes.

MALAYSIANS are blessed, or if you will, cursed because we have some of the best cuisine in the world. This is, of course, a biased view from a local gourmand.

But, it must be pointed out good food is causing Malaysians to suffer illnesses which are more and more those of developed nations.

We have cases of heart disease, diabetes and strokes to rival any Western country and we are seeing more of our younger adults falling ill to these illnesses in the prime of their lives.

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) consultant occupational therapist Associate Professor Nathan Vytialingam said one common factor that most of these patients have is that they are afflicted with a disorder known in medical circles as metabolic syndrome or syndrome X.

The term metabolic disorder was first used in 1977 by physician, Dr. H. Haller, when he described associated conditions that lead to increased risk of atherosclerotic disease. He noted obesity, diabetesmellitus, high cholesterol, high uric acid and fatty liver were associated with accelerated atherosclerosis.

Yet, even before the term was used, other physicians in the 1940s had already recognised the association between atherosclerotic diseases and obesity and diabetes.

Other diseases and signs associated with metabolic syndrome include polycystic ovarian syndrome, hemochromatosis (iron overload) and acanthosis nigricans, a skin disorder of dark velvety patches especially in the

neck, arms or groin that is associated with obesity.

Vytialingam said metabolic syndrome is recognised as a cluster of conditions that occurs together to increase the risk of atherosclerotic diseases such as heart attacks, strokes and diabetes.

The underlying cause is believed to be a combination of genetic predisposition, physical inactivity and being overweight. Physiologically, the dominant risk is increased abdominal fat and insulin resistance.

Scientists are still trying to understand what causes the insulin resistance, but it is generally believed to be a complex of genetic inheritance as well as lifestyle choices such as physical inactivity and obesity. Other risk factors include advanced age race (Hispanics and Asians have higher risks) and family history of diabetes.

There are several definitions of what constitutes metabolic syndrome but the one that is well accepted is the one presented by the National Cholesterol Education Programme Adult Treatment Panel III in 2001, (updated by the American Heart Association) which requires three or more of the following criteria to be fulfilled for metabolic syndrome:

- Elevated waist circumference (102cm for men, 88cm for women)
- Elevated triglycerides >150 mg/dL
- Reduced HDL <40 mg/dL for women 50 mg/dL for men
- Elevated BP >130/85 mmHg
- Elevated fasting blood sugar 100 mg/dL 5.6 mmol/L

Patients who fulfil the criteria for metabolic syndrome are at increased risk of future illness. Men with three factors of metabolic syndrome are nearly twice as likely to have a heart attack or stroke and more than three times as likely to develop heart disease as are those with no factors.

To reduce the likelihood of being afflicted by diseases associated with metabolic syndrome, certain steps must be taken.

Aggressive lifestyle changes such as quitting smoking, and losing weight by dieting and increasing physical activity, do not require any medications. It is recommended that patients get 30 to 60 minutes daily of moderate intensity exercise such as brisk walking.

Patients reduce their body weight to achieve a body mass index of 25kg/m² or less. Healthy eating habits, with reduction of saturated and trans fats and cholesterol would be helpful.

Doctors can help patients reduce blood pressure and cholesterol levels with medications. Medications that help increase the body's sensitivity to insulin will help the body to use it more effectively. Aspirin therapy can further reduce risk of heart attack and stroke.

With some attention to the food that

we eat, lots of physical activity and regular visits to physicians, many of us will survive yet to enjoy modern living and not fall prey to its diseases.

The Malaysian Healthy Ageing Society together with the Department of Medicine Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, UPM is organising a four-day scientific meeting on "Metabolic Disorders — An Integrative Approach to Healthy Living" starting Thursday at Berjaya Times Square Hotel, Kuala Lumpur.

Pre conference workshops (Thursday) are on diet and nutrition, yoga and metabolic syndrome, and nursing and rehabilitation — diabetic and cardiac care. For enquiries, call 03-2095-5600 or e-mail malhas@streamyx.com

This meeting will be officially opened by Tunku Ampuan Negri Sembilan, Tuanku Najihah Al-Marhum Tunku Besar Burhanuddin.

Vytialingam who is also the organising chairman said University of Sydney Professor of Human Nutrition, Dr Ian Caterson will deliver the keynote address.

Dr Caterson is an expert on obesity, the metabolic syndrome and insulin resistance. He was a member of the National Health and Member of the Royal Commission working party on the prevention of overweight and obesity and chaired the National Obesity Prevention Group for the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care.

He is also on the management committee of the International Obesity Task Force and a regional advisor on obesity for the World Health Organisation.

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