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All body fat is not the same. Researchers and health care professionals often measure overweight in pounds or with a calculation called the Body Mass Index (BMI). But some of the nation's premier researchers now say that although these tools are easy to use and reliable, waistline fat poses far more health dangers than fat stored elsewhere. Medical experts are urging greater use of a waistline measurement when assessing health risks.

Men who have waists over 40 inches and women who have waists over 35 inches have too much waistline fat and are considered obese. In one study, these people were 70 to 80 percent more likely to develop high blood pressure within five-and-a-half years than those with smaller waists.

Waistline obesity is also one of the most common characteristics of metabolic syndrome. People with metabolic syndrome are at greater risk for diabetes, as well as high blood pressure. Metabolic syndrome doubles the risk of heart attack or stroke, according to one study.

A person with metabolic syndrome has out of range values for any three of the following: waist measurement, HDL ("good") cholesterol, blood triglycerides, fasting blood sugar, and blood pressure. They also are at increased risk for inflammation, high uric acid (which can lead to gout), an increased tendency for blood clotting, and other blood vessel abnormalities.

Studies also link large waists with greater risk of some cancers. Scientists believe that

the higher levels of insulin and insulin-like growth factors commonly seen with excess abdominal fat stimulate cancer cell growth. Excess waistline fat seems to approximately double the risk of breast cancer in women after menopause, regardless of overall weight status. Since prostate cancer is hormonally related, it may also be affected by sex hormone proteins, which abnormal insulin levels disrupt. When men adopt low-fat diets and exercise regularly, insulin levels shift to more normal levels. Other research tentatively links metabolic syndrome and high insulin levels with a greater risk of colon cancer.

Body fat can be carried just under the skin or deeper in the body. Excess waistline fat often indicates greater fat in deep abdominal storage, or in organs like the liver. These deep deposits are associated with greater elevations of insulin.

When fat cells enlarge, they also produce more of some immune system proteins. These proteins are transported directly to the liver, where they release inflammatory substances that raise the risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and probably cancer. In addition, fat cells release blood-clotting factors that can affect blood vessels and put the body in a state favoring clots. This is why the risk of heart attack and stroke rises.

People can inherit a susceptibility for metabolic syndrome, and possibly for storing fat on the waist. But lifestyle choices, like a high-fat diet and sedentary behavior, coupled with aging and some medications or health problems, can actually trigger the syndrome. Regular exercise and a balanced diet are the best strategies to control waistline fat and prevent metabolic syndrome. When needed, doctor prescribed medications can be taken to improve insulin abnormalities.

If you need help to improve your eating habits and prevent weight gain, *Shape Your Future...Your Weigh!*[™] can help. Contact your local base Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian for more information.