Discussing your medication

Medications for people with mental illness have different side effects and may be associated with weight gain and raised blood sugar – two features of metabolic syndrome. If you have one or more features of metabolic syndrome, your doctor might decide to review your mental health medication to protect your physical health.

Decisions about mental health medication take into consideration your overall needs, including symptom management and side effects. Your doctor is an expert about medication, and you are an expert about your experience of mental illness and what makes you feel better or worse. You need to be very active in making decisions about medication and decide what side effects you can tolerate and what risks you are willing to accept.

Learn as much as you can about the potential benefits and side effects of medication you have been prescribed, and ask your doctor for clarification on anything you do not understand.

Setting realistic expectations

In mental health, as with any other major illness, you and your family must learn to cope with demanding circumstances. Diet, exercise, work and social obligations may represent a considerable challenge, and physical health could become an important consideration for the first time.

Whatever health strategy you use, keep metabolic syndrome in perspective. Don't be discouraged if it takes longer than you think to accomplish a goal, or lose heart and give up if your first attempt does not work. Keep trying other strategies until you find something that works.

With time, you may begin to feel more confident and secure about your ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle. At this stage, friends and family members whom you asked for help may continue doing things for you when you no longer want or need their assistance. Periodically re-evaluate your lifestyle goals with them, to keep them informed and to help everyone set realistic expectations.

The World Federation for Mental Health has members in over 100 countries on six continents and is an accredited consultant to the United Nations and several of its specialised agencies. For more information visit www.wfmh.org.

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Body & mind

Metabolic Syndrome and Mental Health Information for Mental Health Consumers and Families

To ensure the physical well-being of people experiencing mental illness there needs to be meaningful collaboration between all those involved, including health professionals, family or friends who are caregivers and the individuals concerned.

What is metabolic syndrome?

There are several conditions that often occur together, including obesity, high blood sugar, high blood pressure and high levels of fat in the bloodstream, which can lead to diseases affecting the heart and blood vessels. Together, these conditions are known as 'metabolic syndrome'.

Why is metabolic syndrome important?
Recent research shows metabolic syndrome is particularly common in people with mental illness, so these individuals need careful monitoring of their physical health. They also need to take as much responsibility as possible for their own health.

Should I talk to my doctor about it?
Yes. If your doctor does not raise the subject, be your own best champion. Talk to your doctor about metabolic syndrome and ask for regular monitoring of your weight, blood sugar, blood pressure and the levels of fats in your blood.

When you visit your doctor, it helps to have a clear idea of what you want to ask and what background your doctor might need. To discuss metabolic syndrome, your doctor may need to know about your family medical history and details of your health-related habits. Avoid talking about information your doctor does not need to know as these things could cause confusion.

If you feel unsure of yourself or have difficulty clarifying your concerns, it may help to have someone go with you for support during your visit, or write down what you plan to say, such as the following questions. In any case, make sure you stick to the point, be clear and brief, and if you do not understand what your doctor says, ask questions for clarification.

- What is my Body Mass Index, glucose tolerance, blood pressure and lipid profile?
- When was the last time these were measured?
- Are these results in the healthy, normal range?
- When will they next be measured?
- Does my medication contribute to metabolic syndrome?
- How important is it for me to try to live a healthier lifestyle?
- Is professional assistance available to help me live a healthier lifestyle?

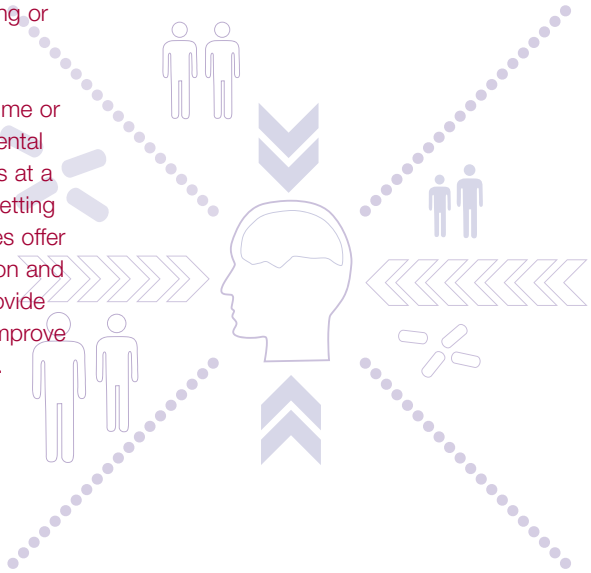
What you can do for yourself
Eating a healthy, balanced diet, being physically active and not smoking are important to prevent metabolic syndrome. You can also monitor your own health. Tell your doctor if your weight changes by more than 3-5 kg (6.5-11 lbs), or if you become increasingly thirsty or need to urinate frequently (symptoms of raised blood sugar).

Ask yourself what unhealthy behaviours you could change, what changes you have tried in the past, and whether you maintained those changes for as long as required. If you are like most people, you may have difficulty changing unhealthy habits and find there is more you can do to improve your physical health.

Even if past efforts were less successful than you hoped, do not be hard on yourself. Decide on some easy goals and plan step-by-step how you can achieve them.

Strategies for healthy living
To make healthy changes easier and more enjoyable, enlist the help of a supportive person, such as a friend, family member or caregiver. Friends and family can help identify situations which tempt you to make unhealthy choices and suggest ways of coping, or avoiding those situations. They can also remind you to make healthy choices or participate in healthy activities with you, such as grocery shopping or going for a walk.

If there is a peer support programme or self-help group for people with mental illness in your community, perhaps at a mental health clinic, think about getting involved. Often, these programmes offer opportunities for nutrition education and recreational activities, and can provide good support for your efforts to improve and maintain your physical health.

Eating the foods you like, but in proportion and prepared in a healthy way, and getting regular moderate exercise are simple ways to incorporate healthy behaviour into your daily routine. Brisk walking, cycling, dancing or swimming is ideal, but simply incorporating more activity into everyday life is a positive step. Some suggestions for healthier living include:

- Schedule regular, healthy meals and snacks
- Write a grocery shopping list and stick to it
- Substitute healthy for unhealthy foods
- Learn what a ‘serving size’ looks like on your plate
- Take up a physical hobby, such as dancing
- Use the stairs, instead of the lift or escalator
- Walk, cycle or get off transport early and walk the last stop