

## 5 things to know about metabolic health

Any health care provider can rattle off the usual keys to a happy, long life: eat healthy food, exercise and avoid risky behaviors.

But [Philip Ovadia, MD](#), wants you to dig deeper and look into five characteristics that may save your life.

Dr. Ovadia, a cardiothoracic surgeon at OSF HealthCare, is talking about metabolic health.

“When we are metabolically healthy, our bodies are properly utilizing the inputs we are giving it,” Dr. Ovadia says. “The primary input we give our body is the food we eat.”

What to avoid: the metabolic syndrome, which describes a set of conditions that indicate a high risk for heart disease, Alzheimer’s disease, cancer and other ailments.

“Most of the chronic conditions people suffer from today can be tied back to the metabolic syndrome and underlying problems with their metabolic health,” Dr. Ovadia says.

The five metabolic health criteria to know:

- Your waist circumference. Dr. Ovadia says to use a measuring tape to measure just above your belly button. Do it first thing in the morning. For men, you’re aiming for a circumference of less than 40 inches. For women, it’s 35 inches.
- Your blood pressure. You can buy an at-home blood pressure kit or have this done at a doctor’s office. Dr. Ovadia says an ideal reading less than 130 over 85. This should be without the use of blood pressure lowering medication.

The last three measures come from bloodwork, which you can ask your provider to order or look for a reputable, independent organization that does so.

- Your fasting blood glucose level. This is the amount of sugar in your bloodstream when you haven’t eaten for a while (typically eight to 12 hours). You want that to be less than 100 milligrams per deciliter. This reading should also be without the use of blood pressure lowering medication.
- Your high-density lipoprotein cholesterol level (HDL). Cholesterol is a fatty, waxy substance that’s responsible for building cells in our body. This is the so-called “good cholesterol” because it helps remove other forms of cholesterol from your bloodstream. Dr. Ovadia says for men, your HDL level should be over 40 milligrams per deciliter. For women, it’s 50 milligrams per deciliter.
- Your triglyceride level. Triglycerides are another fatty substance that provides the body with energy. You’re looking for a reading of less than 150 milligrams per deciliter.

Dr. Ovadia says if three or more of these markers are outside the normal range, you have the metabolic syndrome. You should see your provider to talk about a plan to improve your health.

If you don’t have access to tools to measure these five markers, there are signs you can watch for.

High blood pressure can cause fatigue, dizziness, vision changes, headaches and anxiety. High blood pressure can cause you to be extra hungry, extra thirsty and urinate often. If you notice these symptoms, see your provider.

[Sleep apnea](#), when people stop breathing during sleep, can also increase your risk for metabolic syndrome. So practice healthy sleeping habits, and see a pulmonologist or sleep specialist if needed.

Manage your stress and other aspects of mental health. Stress can drive up blood pressure. Talk to a mental health provider about treatment options.

Dr. Ovardia also recommends avoiding sugary and processed foods. Chief offenders: candy, snack cakes, cereal, cookies, chips, crackers, juices, sodas and packaged or canned food. Think boxes, bags and colorful labels. Look for added sugar on the nutrition facts. Also, pay attention to how you feel after eating. If you feel hungry again quickly, that's a sign that the food is not providing your body with the nutrition it's looking for.

Dr. Ovardia suggests foods that are as close to naturally occurring as possible. Things that grow in the ground or things that eat things that grow in the ground.

For breakfast, try fresh fruit or a hard-boiled egg instead of a biscuit. For lunch, eat a salad with ingredients you mixed instead of a pre-packaged salad. And for dinner, get a lean protein like chicken or fish from the deli counter, not sliced meat in a package.

Visit the [OSF HealthCare website](#) for healthy recipes.