

What Is Japan Doing About Metabolic Syndrome?



Measurement data can be confirmed via smartphone with Tanita's program

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IN Japan, the percentage of cancer, heart disease and cerebrovascular disease as causes of death has tended to increase in recent years. We now know that these diseases do not come just from aging or genetic disposition; they are also deeply related to lifestyle factors such as improper diet, lack of exercise, excessive alcohol consumption, smoking



Tanita's sphygmomanometer sends data wirelessly

and stress. Lifestyle-related diseases like obesity, hypertension and diabetes can be relatively mild by themselves, but when they occur together the danger of precipitating a stroke or myocardial infarction escalates. Although the prevalence of metabolic syndrome (visceral fat syndrome)—a precursor to full-blown lifestyle-related diseases—is lower in Japan than in many other countries, it is still rising here. Now reportedly affecting one out of every two men and one out of every four women over forty in Japan, metabolic syndrome has become a factor hindering long, healthy lives.

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) has set a goal to lower the prevalence of metabolic syndrome and the number of those at risk by 25 percent between 2008 and 2015, and established a program of specific health checkups and specific health guidance. The program encourages individuals to exercise regularly, eat a balanced diet, and refrain from smoking.

More specifically, the MHLW conducts annual examinations (including an interview, measuring height, weight, abdominal circumference and blood pressure, and taking a blood sample) for people between 40 and 74 years old. Abdominal circumference receives particular attention, with 85 centimeters (33 inches) for men and 90 centimeters (35 inches) for women and above indicating visceral obesity. Adding information on blood pressure, blood glucose and smoking history, the ministry evaluates the risk of having metabolic syndrome and provides relevant health advice.

According to an interim report in which the ministry's Health Insurance Bureau reviewed the data of the past four years, more people receiving the specific health guidance avoided being at risk of metabolic syndrome than those who didn't, with a difference of 30 percent in men and 40 percent in women.

"Recently we've been using the strength of private companies, working together in activities to extend healthy life expectancies," says Hiroyuki Noda, who is with the Cancer Control and Health Promotion Division of the ministry's Health Service Bureau. In a "Smart Life Project" that began in 2011, for example, the ministry has collaborated with 2,300 organizations in the private sector and in local governments, calling for specific actions to extend healthy life expectancies by raising awareness among employees of the participating companies and through each organization's products and services.



A coach takes Kashiwazaki City residents through a stretch band routine



Passing along nutrition and exercise guidance based on exam data

Tanita, a large manufacturer of measurement devices participating in the project, is one example. The company uses the Internet and pedometers, body composition analyzers and blood pressure monitors, all equipped with wireless communication, to continuously manage the health of its employees. Over the first six months of the program, Tanita's employees lost an average of 3.6 kilograms, earning the company the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare's highest award in 2013. "With this kind of new effort, the message is finally getting across to the younger people who up to now have not been conscious of lifestyle-related diseases," Noda says.

Some local authorities and travel agencies have also recently set up programs in which participants stay at an inn or hotel to receive health guidance on exercise and nutrition. Kashiwazaki City in Niigata Prefecture, for instance, began a two-day program at a hotel in 2012, aimed at local citizens under 65 years old, who learn from a dietitian and an exercise instructor about improving their diet and exercising to raise their basal metabolism. Since the participants use public facilities, they pay only 7,000 yen for the program, and the number of applicants has been increasing each year.

Preventing lifestyle-related diseases and extending healthy life expectancy are not issues for the elderly alone. Raising consciousness about health before they become sick will enable more people to live longer, more vigorous lives. 