Leyla weighs in: Can belly fat lead to dementia?

If you've been to any of my lectures in previous years, you know that abdominal fat is a hallmark of the metabolic syndrome, also known as syndrome X and insulin resistance syndrome. A waist circumference of 35 inches or greater for women and 38-40 inches or greater for men is just one of several criteria used to diagnose the metabolic syndrome (a topic for an upcoming newsletter!).

So what's the link between belly fat and dementia? We know that diabetes and cardiovascular disease increase the risk of dementia. Metabolic syndrome would be considered a close progressive phase of both of these conditions. Abdominal fat includes not only the fat under the skin (subcutaneous fat) but visceral fat, too. That's the fat between and around the organs and muscles of the abdomen.

Visceral fat is not just another fat depot like hip and thigh fat. It's active. In fact, it behaves like an endocrine gland, releasing cytokines that promote inflammation in arteries—including carotid arteries (which feed your brain). This can lead to cognitive decline.

The scientific literature reveals an association between high insulin levels (a fat storage hormone) and the tangled beta-amyloid plaques found in the brains of individuals with Alzheimer's disease. As you probably know by now, Alzheimer's has another name: type 3 diabetes.

And for those of you getting through the day on coffee and diet soda because of mismanaged work/life schedules and then not getting enough sleep at night: The high levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which is relentlessly coursing through your veins as we speak, is responsible for eventually burning out the hippocampus—the part of your brain responsible for memory.

Not to mention packing on more belly fat.

So please, do your future self a favor by getting plenty of rest at night and trimming your waistline to a healthy measurement. Your brain will thank you.

To your health!