

Medical News & Perspectives | QUICK UPTAKES

Vacationing More Often May Reduce Metabolic Syndrome Risk

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For all the dedicated workers who bypassed taking time off for a summer getaway, a recent *Psychology & Health* study offers a bit of advice: using vacation time instead of forfeiting it could lessen the chances of developing metabolic syndrome, which raises the risk of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.

The Problem

Although 74% of all US workers have paid vacation time, they only use about half of it. That could mean missing out not only on a boost in well-being but also on more tangible physical benefits such as a lower risk of heart disease for men or less depression among women.

But research on the health effects of vacationing is scarce, in part because investigators haven't had a standardized method to study how certain aspects of taking time off are tied to health outcomes.

Vacation Science

In the past, studies often examined a single vacation variable, such as how often workers take off, where they go, or activities they pursue while vacationing. But these authors theorized that there's more to it than that. So along with how often workers vacation, they added 11 more variables to create an assessment tool that might give a clearer picture of how vacations affect workers' health. Those variables include:

- Location—going away or taking a “staycation” at home.
- Time and stress involved in traveling to a vacation site.
- Cost and financial stress.
- Social context—who came along and how much time and stress was involved in childcare.
- Level of disengagement from work as well as personal worries.
- Activities.
- Alcohol use.
- Sleep habits.

The Link With Metabolic Syndrome

With a new study tool in hand, the authors set out to examine the potential relation-

ship between vacationing and metabolic syndrome. They noted that the defining symptoms—large waist circumference, hypertension, elevated triglyceride levels, low high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol, and elevated blood glucose—can be controlled with lifestyle changes. Perhaps, the authors suggested, vacationing might be considered among risk-reducing lifestyle changes such as exercise and giving up tobacco.

**Study Design**

The authors enrolled 63 adults, about half of whom worked in health care or education jobs. They were predominantly white women whose average age was 43 years. They agreed to have their waist circumference, blood pressure, triglycerides, HDL cholesterol, and fasting blood glucose measured. In addition, they completed an electronic survey about vacations, defined as at least 1 day of paid time off, that they had taken during the previous 12 months. Participants also met with trained interviewers to discuss all the variables in the vacation assessment tool.

Vacation Patterns

Results showed that, on average, during the previous 12 months the study participants

- Took about 5 vacations, ranging from none to 15.
- Used about 14 paid vacation days.

- Spent about 40% of their vacations at home.
- Considered their vacations pleasant, with little stress.
- Didn't drink much alcohol and slept well during vacations.

Statistically Speaking

Overall, about 21% of the participants met criteria for metabolic syndrome, lower than the 35% prevalence in the US population. Participants had an average of 1.48 metabolic symptoms. Analysis of the links between metabolic syndrome and vacations showed that

- Each additional vacation was associated with a 24% reduced risk of metabolic syndrome.
- The probability of meeting the criteria for metabolic syndrome was about 47% for participants who took no vacations, 16% for those who took the average 5 vacations, and about 1% for those who took the maximum 15 vacations.
- Each additional vacation was associated with an 8% decrease in the number of metabolic symptoms.
- The number of vacations the participants took, but not the total number of vacation days they used, was associated with reductions in metabolic symptoms.

Vacation vs Staycation

Taking more vacations at home was associated with a reduced risk of metabolic syndrome. The probability of meeting the metabolic syndrome criteria was 38% for participants who didn't vacation at home compared with 11% for those who stayed home, on average, for about half of their vacations. The number of vacations taken away from home didn't influence metabolic syndrome risk; neither did the total number of vacation days spent either at home or away.

However...

The study's retrospective design makes it difficult to tell whether vacationing affected metabolic syndrome status or vice versa. The study authors wrote that

future studies should be prospective to help determine whether vacationing is associated with future risk of metabolic syndrome. In addition, the participants were primarily white women, making it challenging to extrapolate the findings to a wider population.

The Upshot

"Anecdotally people say vacations are relaxing, so the thought is that if you vacation more frequently you've got a reduction in stress and associated physiological arousal and that may translate into fewer of these metabolic symptoms," lead

author Bryce Hruska, PhD, of Syracuse University, said in a [video](#) news release. "I think the important part is that you're using your vacation in whatever way is best for you." ■

Note: Source references are available through embedded hyperlinks in the article text online.