The Association Between Metabolic Syndrome and Colorectal Cancer Risk by Obesity Status in Korean Women: A Nationwide Cohort Study

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Objectives: This study aimed to determine the association between metabolic syndrome (MetS) and the incidence of colorectal cancer (CRC) in Korean women with obesity.

Methods: Cancer-free women (n = 6,142,486) aged 40-79 years, who underwent National Health Insurance Service health examinations in 2009 and 2010 were included. The incidence of CRC was followed until 2018. The hazard ratio (HR) of MetS for the incidence of colon and rectal cancer was analyzed according to body mass index (BMI) categories, adjusting for confounders such as women’s reproductive factors. In addition, the heterogeneity of associations across BMI categories was assessed.

Results: Women with MetS were at increased risk of colon and rectal cancer compared to women without MetS (HR, 1.20; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.16 to 1.23 and HR, 1.15; 95% CI, 1.11 to 1.20), respectively. The HR of MetS for colon cancer across BMI categories was 1.12 (95% CI, 1.06 to 1.19), 1.14 (95% CI, 1.08 to 1.20), and 1.16 (95% CI, 1.12 to 1.21) in women with BMIs <23.0 kg/m², 23.0-24.9 kg/m², and ≥25.0 kg/m², respectively. The HR of MetS for rectal cancer across corresponding BMI categories was 1.16 (95% CI, 1.06 to 1.26), 1.14 (95% CI, 1.05 to 1.23), and 1.13 (95% CI, 1.06 to 1.20). The heterogeneity of associations across BMI categories was not significant in either colon or rectal cancer (p = 0.587 for colon cancer and p = 0.927 for rectal cancer).

Conclusions: Women with MetS were at increased risk of colon and rectal cancer. Clinical and public health strategies should be considered for primary CRC prevention with an emphasis on improving women’s metabolic health across all BMI groups.

Key words: Colorectal neoplasms, Body mass index, Metabolic syndrome

INTRODUCTION

Metabolic syndrome (MetS), a cluster of pathological conditions that includes visceral obesity, hyperglycemia, dyslipidemia, and increased blood pressure (BP), is a growing global health concern [1]. Although MetS and obesity are associated by definition, certain individuals who are obese with non-pathological metabolic components are called metabolically healthy obese [2]. The prevalence of metabolically healthy obesity (MHO) among obese people was estimated to be 50% if fewer than 3 component criteria for MetS were satisfied and 7% if none of the MetS component criteria were satisfied [3].

Colorectal cancer (CRC) is a leading cause of cancer-related death, and its incidence is increasing worldwide [4]. The associations among MetS, obesity, and CRC are well established [5,6]. A meta-analysis study found that metabolically un-
healthy obesity (MUHO) and MHO increased the risk of CRC in men. In women, however, a comparison of the association between metabolically healthy normal weight and CRC to the association of MHO or MUHO and CRC was not shown to be statistically significant. The study suggested that this gender-based difference might be due to variations in hormonal status between men and women or to gender-based differences in CRC carcinogenesis [7]. In addition to hormonal effects on CRC carcinogenesis, the association between MetS, obesity, and the anatomical site of the CRC should be considered. A study by Shen et al. [5] suggested that MetS was associated with a significantly increased risk of colon cancer in both genders, but not associated with rectal cancer in women. Another study showed that the association between obesity and colon cancer was prominent in both men and women, whereas the association between obesity and rectal cancer was less significant in women [6]. There have been several studies in Korea on the associations between MetS and CRC, obesity and CRC, or a combination of MetS, obesity, and CRC [8-11]. However, most Korean studies have not adjusted for women’s reproductive factors as confounders, despite the association between reproductive factors and CRC risk [12-14]. In addition, the association between the combination of MetS and obesity and the anatomical site of CRC in women has received little attention.

Therefore, we used a nationwide insurance-based cohort study to investigate the associations between metabolic health, obesity, and CRC based on anatomical site in Korean women, adjusting for reproductive factors.

**METHODS**

**Study Population**

The National Health Insurance Service (NHIS) is a single mandatory health insurance system that covers most of the Korean population. The NHIS conducts biennial health examinations for most Koreans as well as age-standardized cancer screenings for adult Koreans. The NHIS health examination includes a self-reported questionnaire on lifestyle factors, family history (first-degree relatives), reproductive factors, anthropometric measurements, and laboratory measurements. Detailed information regarding the NHIS data is available in the cohort profile by Lee et al. [15].

Women who underwent the biennial health examination in 2009 and 2010 and were at risk of CRC were included in this study. Among the 6,278,830 women who underwent the NHIS health examination, we excluded the following: women aged >80 years (n=56,057), those with missing information on MetS (n=12,115), those with healthcare utilization for any type of cancer, and those registered in the Rare and Intractable Disease (RID) program before their health examination date or within 6 months following that date to exclude possible prevalent cases at screening (n=68,172). The final study sample included 6,142,486 women (Figure 1).

**Definition of Metabolic Syndrome and Obesity**

We used the modified National Cholesterol Education Program Adult Treatment Panel III to define MetS [16]. The MetS components were defined as follows: (1) waist circumference (WC) ≥ 80 cm, (2) fasting plasma glucose (FPG) ≥ 100 mg/dL, (3) triglyceride (TG) level ≥ 150 mg/dL, (4) high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL) level <50 mg/dL, and (5) elevated BP (systolic BP ≥ 130 mmHg or diastolic BP ≥ 85 mmHg). MetS was defined as present if the participant met the criteria for 3 or more of the 5 above-mentioned components.

Obesity was defined using the body mass index (BMI) criteria for Asians [17]. BMI was calculated using anthropometric measurements and categorized into 3 groups: (1) normal (BMI}
<23.0 kg/m²), (2) overweight (BMI 23.0-24.9 kg/m²), and (3) obese (BMI ≥ 25.0 kg/m²).

**Follow-up and Primary Endpoint**

The incidence of CRC was used as the primary endpoint and was identified by linking the National Health Screening Database to the NHIS Health Care Utilization Database on December 31, 2018. The incidence of CRC was defined by the International Classification of Disease, 10th version (ICD-10) codes for malignant neoplasms (C18-C20) combined with the RID registration program claims codes as entered into the NHIS health care utilization database for cancer (V193, V194). The RID registration program is a special-case system that lowers co-payment rates for patients with severe, rare, and incurable diseases. Patients with cancer who are registered in this system receive insurance benefits according to the benefit extension policy [18]. Patients are required to register their clinical information to qualify as a special case. Therefore, combining these codes increases the reliability of the NHIS cancer codes [19]. CRC was stratified into 2 kinds of cancer using the ICD-10 codes C18-C19 for colon cancer and C20 for rectal cancer.

The follow-up period was from the health examination date in 2009 or 2010 until December 31, 2018, or until the date of death, date of CRC diagnosis, or date of another cancer diagnosis, whichever came first. A diagnosis of CRC was defined as an event, while death, diagnosis of another cancer, and no cancer incidence by December 31, 2018, were censored.

**Statistical Analysis**

The general characteristics of study participants with and without MetS were compared using the t-test for continuous variables and the chi-square test for categorical variables. The crude incidence rate (CIR) of CRC per 100 000 person-years was determined across BMI categories. The association between the presence of MetS and the incidence of CRC was analyzed using the Cox proportional hazard regression model adjusted for age, smoking, alcohol consumption, vigorous physical activity, moderate physical activity, walking, age at menarche, age at menopause, parity, breastfeeding, oral contraceptive use, and first-degree family history of cancer. Subgroup analyses according to MetS components were conducted using the same Cox proportional hazards regression model. The proportional hazard assumption of MetS was tested using a log-log survival plot, and the survival distribution function showed parallel lines, indicating that the assumption was satisfied. Hazard ratios (HRs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for the association between MetS and cancer incidence were calculated and stratified by BMI categories. To test heterogeneity across BMI categories, the p-value for heterogeneity was calculated by using the fully adjusted HR and 95% CI with the "metagen" function of the R platform for meta-analysis. Statistical significance was set at p-value < 0.05. Statistical analyses were performed using SAS version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA) and R version 3.5.0 (R Core Team, Vienna, Austria).

**Ethics Statement**

Before each health examination, informed consent was obtained from the participant that allowed the transfer of results to the national health screening database. The NHIS database was available for research after the study proposal was reviewed and approved by the National Health Insurance Sharing Service (NHISS). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Hanyang University College of Medicine approved the study (IRB No. HYI-18-175-1), and we obtained access to the national health screening database of the NHIS based on IRB approval.

**RESULTS**

Of the 6 142 486 women, 2 668 255 (43.4%) had a BMI <23.0 kg/m², 1 518 530 (24.7%) had a BMI ranging from 23.0 kg/m² to 24.9 kg/m², and 1 954 932 (31.8%) had a BMI ≥ 25.0 kg/m². In general, women with MetS were older and less physically active across all BMI categories. Compared to women without MetS, a higher proportion of women with MetS had a late menarche (≥17 years), were menopausal, had given birth, breastfed for more than 6 months, used oral contraceptives, and had a lower baseline proportion of cancer in their family history (Table 1). The pattern of differences between women with and without MetS was similar after stratification by BMI (Supplemental Material 1).

Table 2 shows the number of incident CRC cases and the CIR per 100 000 person-years across MetS and BMI categories stratified according to cancer site. There were 27 384 cases of colon cancer and 11 103 cases of rectal cancer observed for 53 435 432.1 person-years. Considering both cancer sites, the CIR was higher in women with MetS than in women without MetS, a higher proportion of women with MetS had a late menarche (≥17 years), were menopausal, had given birth, breastfed for more than 6 months, used oral contraceptives, and had a lower baseline proportion of cancer in their family history (Table 1). The pattern of differences between women with and without MetS was similar after stratification by BMI (Supplemental Material 1).

Table 3 shows the results of the Cox proportional hazards model. In all models, MetS showed a significant HR for both
The association between MetS and both cancers was consistently significant after stratification by BMI. In colon cancer, MetS showed an HR of 1.14 for models 1 and 2. After adjusting for reproductive factors (model 3), MetS showed a significant HR of 1.20 (95% CI, 1.16 to 1.23). After stratifying the BMI categories, the association between MetS and colon cancer was still significant across all BMI categories, with an HR range of 1.12-1.16. For rectal cancer, MetS showed a pattern like that of colon cancer in all models. The HR for rectal cancer was still significant after BMI stratification with a range of 1.13-1.16. However, the p-value for the heterogeneity of BMI categories and MetS status was not significant for either cancer type ($p = 0.587$ and $p = 0.927$ for colon and rectal cancers, respectively, Table 3).

Table 4 shows the association between each MetS component and the risk of CRC. In colon cancer, the association between each MetS component and colon cancer was significant, with an HR range of 1.07-1.18. After stratifying the BMI categories, all components of MetS, except low HDL and high BP, were associated with colon cancer risk. Low HDL levels did not show a significant association with colon cancer risk in people with a BMI $<23.0$ kg/m$^2$ or a BMI of 23.0-24.9 kg/m$^2$;
Table 2. Incident colorectal cancer and CIR per 100,000 person-years among women with the presence of MetS across BMI categories

| Site     | MetS Without, n | MetS Incident, n | CIR (95% CI) | MetS With, n | MetS Incident, n | CIR (95% CI) |
|----------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Colon    | Total           |                 |              |              |                 |              |
|          |                 | 4,632,709       | 17,146       | 42.5 (41.9, 43.1) | 1,509,777       | 10,238       | 78.0 (76.5, 79.5) |
|          | BMI (kg/m²)     |                 |              |              |                 |              |
|          | < 23.0          | 2,432,786       | 7,956        | 37.6 (36.8, 38.4) | 235,469         | 1,547        | 75.4 (71.6, 79.2) |
|          | 23.0-24.9       | 1,151,059       | 4,388        | 43.9 (42.6, 45.2) | 367,471         | 2,444        | 76.4 (73.4, 79.4) |
|          | ≥ 25.0          | 1,048,290       | 4,790        | 52.5 (51.0, 54.0) | 906,642         | 6,247        | 79.4 (77.4, 81.4) |
| Rectum   | Total           |                 |              |              |                 |              |
|          |                 | 4,632,709       | 7,176        | 17.8 (17.4, 18.2) | 1,509,777       | 3,927        | 29.9 (29.0, 30.8) |
|          | BMI (kg/m²)     |                 |              |              |                 |              |
|          | < 23.0          | 2,432,786       | 3,419        | 16.1 (15.6, 16.6) | 235,469         | 663          | 32.3 (29.8, 34.8) |
|          | 23.0-24.9       | 1,151,059       | 1,871        | 18.7 (17.9, 19.5) | 367,471         | 966          | 30.2 (28.3, 32.1) |
|          | ≥ 25.0          | 1,048,290       | 1,884        | 20.7 (19.8, 21.6) | 906,642         | 2,291        | 29.1 (27.9, 30.3) |

CIR, crude incidence rate; MetS, metabolic syndrome; BMI, body mass index; CI, confidence interval.

Table 3. Colon and rectal cancer risk by BMI categories across women with or without MetS

| Site   | Presence of MetS | Cox proportional hazard models¹ | p for heterogeneity² |
|--------|------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|
|        |                  | Unadjusted model | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |               |
| Colon  |                  |                  |         |         |         |               |
| Total  | MetS (−)         | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) |               |
|        | MetS (+)         | 1.76 (1.49, 2.08) | 1.14 (1.11, 1.17) | 1.14 (1.11, 1.17) | 1.20 (1.16, 1.23) |               |
|        |                  | 2.04 (1.94, 2.16) | 1.12 (1.06, 1.18) | 1.12 (1.05, 1.18) | 1.12 (1.06, 1.19) |               |
|        |                  | 1.76 (1.67, 1.85) | 1.14 (1.08, 1.20) | 1.13 (1.08, 1.19) | 1.14 (1.08, 1.20) |               |
|        | ≥ 25.0           | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) |               |
|        | MetS (+)         | 1.52 (1.47, 1.58) | 1.16 (1.12, 1.21) | 1.16 (1.11, 1.20) | 1.16 (1.12, 1.21) |               |
| Rectum |                  |                  |         |         |         |               |
| Total  | MetS (−)         | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) |               |
|        | MetS (+)         | 1.67 (1.36, 2.06) | 1.14 (1.10, 1.19) | 1.14 (1.09, 1.19) | 1.15 (1.11, 1.20) |               |
|        |                  | 2.04 (1.88, 2.22) | 1.16 (1.06, 1.27) | 1.16 (1.06, 1.26) | 1.16 (1.06, 1.26) |               |
|        | MetS (+)         | 1.83 (1.51, 1.76) | 1.14 (1.05, 1.24) | 1.14 (1.05, 1.24) | 1.14 (1.05, 1.23) |               |
|        | ≥ 25.0           | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) |               |
|        | MetS (+)         | 1.42 (1.33, 1.51) | 1.14 (1.07, 1.21) | 1.13 (1.06, 1.21) | 1.13 (1.06, 1.20) |               |

Values are presented as hazard ratio (95% confidence interval).
BMI, body mass index; MetS, metabolic syndrome.
¹Model 1: adjusted for age; Model 2: adjusted for age, smoking, drinking, vigorous physical activity, moderate physical activity, walking, and family history of cancer; Model 3: adjusted for the variables in model 2, in addition to age at menarche, age at menopause, parity, breastfeeding duration, and oral contraceptive use.
²Using hazard ratio of model 3.

Table 4. Colon and rectal cancer risk by BMI categories across women with or without components of metabolic syndrome

| Site   | BMI (kg/m²) | Level of component | Cox proportional hazard models¹ | p for heterogeneity² |
|--------|-------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|
|        |             | WC < 80 cm         | Unadjusted model | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |               |
| Colon  | Total       | 1.00 (reference)   | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) |               |
|        | < 23.0      | 1.69 (1.58, 1.82)  | 1.10 (1.07, 1.14) | 1.10 (1.07, 1.14) | 1.18 (1.15, 1.21) |               |
|        | 23.0-24.9   | 1.82 (1.72, 1.92)  | 1.08 (1.02, 1.14) | 1.08 (1.02, 1.14) | 1.08 (1.02, 1.14) | 0.422       |
|        | ≥ 25.0      | 1.83 (1.56, 1.71)  | 1.10 (1.04, 1.15) | 1.09 (1.04, 1.15) | 1.10 (1.04, 1.15) |               |
|        | WC ≥ 80 cm  | 1.63 (1.54, 1.73)  | 1.14 (1.08, 1.21) | 1.14 (1.07, 1.21) | 1.14 (1.07, 1.21) |               |

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| Site | BMI (kg/m²) | Level of component | Cox proportional hazard models<sup>1</sup> | p for heterogeneity<sup>1</sup> |
|------|-------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
|      |             | Unadjusted model   | Model 1  | Model 2  | Model 3  |
|      | FPG <100 mg/dL | 1.00 (reference)  | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) |
| Total | FPG ≥100 mg/dL | 1.40 (1.30, 1.50) | 1.13 (1.10, 1.16) | 1.01 (1.00, 1.19) | 0.923 |
| <23.0 | FPG ≥100 mg/dL | 1.49 (1.42, 1.55) | 1.13 (1.08, 1.18) | 1.07 (1.13, 1.18) | 0.973 |
| ≥25.0 | FPG ≥100 mg/dL | 1.40 (1.34, 1.48) | 1.13 (1.08, 1.19) | 1.14 (1.08, 1.19) | 0.000 |
|      | TG <150 mg/dL | 1.32 (1.27, 1.37) | 1.14 (1.09, 1.18) | 1.13 (1.09, 1.18) | 0.000 |
| Total | TG ≥150 mg/dL | 1.45 (1.26, 1.67) | 1.11 (1.08, 1.14) | 1.11 (1.08, 1.14) | 0.000 |
| <23.0 | TG ≥150 mg/dL | 1.64 (1.57, 1.73) | 1.11 (1.05, 1.16) | 1.05 (1.05, 1.16) | 0.000 |
| ≥25.0 | TG ≥150 mg/dL | 1.28 (1.24, 1.33) | 1.11 (1.07, 1.16) | 1.11 (1.07, 1.16) | 0.000 |
|      | HDL ≥50 mg/dL | 1.00 (reference)  | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 0.000 |
| Total | HDL <50 mg/dL | 1.24 (1.18, 1.30) | 1.05 (1.01, 1.09) | 1.06 (1.02, 1.10) | 0.000 |
| <23.0 | HDL <50 mg/dL | 1.30 (1.24, 1.36) | 1.02 (0.98, 1.07) | 1.06 (0.98, 1.08) | 0.129 |
| ≥25.0 | HDL <50 mg/dL | 1.19 (1.15, 1.24) | 1.05 (1.00, 1.10) | 1.04 (0.99, 1.10) | 0.000 |
|      | WC <80 cm     | 1.00 (reference)  | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 0.000 |
| Total | WC ≥80 cm     | 1.59 (1.44, 1.76) | 1.10 (1.05, 1.15) | 1.04 (1.01, 1.19) | 0.591 |
| <23.0 | WC ≥80 cm     | 1.76 (1.62, 1.91) | 1.08 (0.99, 1.17) | 1.06 (0.98, 1.17) | 0.000 |
| ≥25.0 | WC ≥80 cm     | 1.50 (1.40, 1.62) | 1.09 (1.01, 1.17) | 1.08 (1.10, 1.17) | 0.000 |
|      | FPG <100 mg/dL | 1.52 (1.39, 1.67) | 1.15 (1.05, 1.26) | 1.14 (1.04, 1.25) | 0.000 |
| Total | FPG ≥100 mg/dL | 1.32 (1.21, 1.44) | 1.10 (1.05, 1.14) | 1.05 (1.00, 1.13) | 0.000 |
| <23.0 | FPG ≥100 mg/dL | 1.42 (1.32, 1.52) | 1.10 (1.12, 1.19) | 1.09 (1.09, 1.19) | 0.879 |
| ≥25.0 | FPG ≥100 mg/dL | 1.33 (1.23, 1.43) | 1.11 (1.03, 1.20) | 1.11 (1.02, 1.20) | 0.000 |
|      | TG <150 mg/dL | 1.22 (1.15, 1.30) | 1.08 (1.02, 1.15) | 1.08 (1.01, 1.15) | 0.000 |
|      | TG ≥150 mg/dL | 1.00 (reference)  | 1.00 (reference) | 1.00 (reference) | 0.000 |
| <23.0 | HDL ≥50 mg/dL | 1.44 (1.23, 1.67) | 1.14 (1.09, 1.18) | 1.13 (1.08, 1.18) | 0.000 |
| ≥25.0 | HDL ≥50 mg/dL | 1.66 (1.54, 1.78) | 1.15 (1.06, 1.24) | 1.14 (1.05, 1.23) | 0.000 |
|      | HDL <50 mg/dL | 1.17 (1.07, 1.27) | 1.01 (0.97, 1.05) | 1.02 (0.98, 1.06) | 0.965 |
| <23.0 | HDL <50 mg/dL | 1.27 (1.18, 1.36) | 1.02 (0.95, 1.09) | 1.02 (0.95, 1.09) | 0.000 |
| ≥25.0 | HDL <50 mg/dL | 1.13 (1.04, 1.22) | 1.09 (0.91, 1.06) | 0.99 (0.92, 1.07) | 0.728 |
|      | Low BP<sup>3</sup> | 1.11 (1.04, 1.18) | 1.03 (0.97, 1.10) | 0.97 (0.97, 1.10) | 0.000 |
| Total | High BP<sup>3</sup> | 1.49 (1.28, 1.73) | 1.08 (1.04, 1.12) | 1.08 (1.04, 1.12) | 0.000 |
| <23.0 | High BP<sup>3</sup> | 1.70 (1.60, 1.81) | 1.09 (1.02, 1.17) | 1.09 (1.02, 1.17) | 0.000 |
| ≥25.0 | High BP<sup>3</sup> | 1.48 (1.37, 1.59) | 1.10 (1.02, 1.19) | 1.10 (1.02, 1.19) | 0.000 |

Values are presented as hazard ratio (95% confidence interval).

BMI, body mass index; WC, waist circumference; FPG, fasting plasma glucose; TG, triglyceride; HDL, high-density lipoprotein cholesterol; BP, blood pressure.

1Model 1: adjusted for age; Model 2: adjusted for age, smoking, drinking, vigorous physical activity, moderate physical activity, walking, and family history of cancer; Model 3: adjusted for the variables in model 2, in addition to age at menarche, age at menopause, parity, breastfeeding duration, and oral contraceptive use.

2Using hazard ratio of model 3.

3BP level was defined by following definition: systolic BP ≥130 mmHg or diastolic BP ≥85 mmHg as “high BP” and the others as “low BP”.
DISCUSSION

This cohort study showed that MetS was associated with an increased risk of both colon and rectal cancer in Korean women. MetS was significantly associated with colon and rectal cancers after adjusting for confounders, including reproductive factors. After stratifying the obesity categories, the associations between MetS and both cancer sites were consistent across all categories. In the subgroup analysis of MetS components, this association was consistent in both colon and rectal cancers, except for low HDL levels in rectal cancer. Although the associations between each MetS component and CRC varied according to subgroup analysis after stratification for obesity level, WC, FPG, and TG were still significant in colon cancer, and FPG and TG were significant in rectal cancer. The heterogeneity of the association of MetS with both cancer sites was not significant in either the main or subgroup analysis.

In previous meta-analyses [5-7], the association between MetS and obesity differed when comparing men and women. Furthermore, several studies have shown that the association between women reproductive factors and CRC is significant [12-14], and that hormone replacement therapy has a protective effect [20,21]. However, our study results (models 2 and 3) showed that the association between MetS or its components and colon or rectal cancer did not differ after adjustment for reproductive factors. Moreover, oral contraceptive usage did not show a significant association with colon cancer risk in people with a BMI of 23.0-24.9 kg/m². However, heterogeneity in HRs according to BMI category was not observed. An increased risk of rectal cancer was associated with all MetS components except low HDL, with an HR of 1.09-1.14. Based on BMI category, the association between each component of MetS and rectal cancer did not show heterogeneity. However, increased WC in those with a BMI < 23.0 kg/m² or a BMI of 23.0-24.9 kg/m², and low BP in those with a BMI ≥ 25.0 kg/m² did not show significant associations with rectal cancer risk.

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women continues; thus, a more precise design is needed, and large observational studies with additional variables, such as dietary patterns, genetic information, interaction effects, and birth cohort effects should be conducted.

This study had some limitations. First, incident cancer cases 6 months prior to health examination (baseline) were excluded to minimize the possibility of reverse causation. Although some examinees who did not have medical records of cancer 6 months prior to the baseline study date may have had a delayed diagnosis, our sensitivity analysis excluding incident cancer within 1 year of the baseline date showed consistent results, indicating that the effect of this limitation was small. Second, we could not consider changes in MetS status and BMI over the follow-up period. As shown in a previous cohort study [32], transitions in metabolic health status can affect CRC incidence in women. Further research on the transitions in metabolic health should be conducted. Third, some known confounders, such as red meat consumption [33], could not be adjusted due to a lack of information. Therefore, the confounding effect of unaccounted-for variables could have affected our results. Fourth, because our study participants were women who underwent health examinations, their general characteristics may be different from those of non-examinees in the general population. However, the participation rate in the NHIS health examination was approximately 70% of the total population [34]. Thus, the effect of selection bias on this association was minimal.

In summary, MetS was associated with an increased risk of colon cancer and rectal cancer in Korean women across all BMI categories. Our study results, based on the observations of a cohort study, could play a key role in designing clinical and public health strategies that focus on the metabolic health of women.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

Supplemental material is available at https://doi.org/10.3961/jpmph.22.286.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest associated with the material presented in this paper.

FUNDING

This work was supported by a National Research Foundation of Korea grant funded by the Korean government’s Ministry of Science and Information and Communication Technologies (grant No. 2021R1A2C1011958).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The funder had no role in the study design; collection, analysis, and interpretation of data; writing of the report; or decision to submit the article for publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed equally to conceiving the study, analyzing the data, and writing this paper.

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