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The Unexpected Health Benefit of Weight Loss Drugs Like Ozempic That No One's Talking About

Beth Ann Mayer | December 11, 2023



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If it weren't for Taylor Swift and Barbie, 2023 would probably be hailed as the "Year of Ozempic." Though it's been FDA-approved since 2017, "Ozempic" was so big this year—celebrities have been sharing more about their experiences using it (including Chelsea Handler explaining how she didn't know she was on it) and Jimmy Kimmel even quipped about it during his hosting duties at the Oscars.

To be clear, Ozempic, a semaglutide, is only FDA-approved for individuals with Type 2 diabetes, and is not approved for weight loss. However, another semaglutide, Wegovy, is approved for weight loss in individuals who are obese or overweight with certain conditions, such as high cholesterol.

Hollywood-hyped "fixes" for weight are a dime a dozen. That being said, experts share that semaglutide and a similar drug, tirzepatide (Zepbound and Mounjaro), deserve attention.

"These drugs have been revolutionary for a few reasons," says Dr. Rekha Kumar, MD, a practicing endocrinologist and CMO at Found. "First, they've helped us achieve efficacy that we haven't seen with older generations of medicines that saw less than 10% body weight loss."

Dr. Kumar says another reason these drugs have been so revolutionary is that doctors, researchers and patients are learning potential new benefits. One, in particular, has surprised people and piqued experts' interest. Experts say this hidden benefit of drugs like Ozempic is worth exploring (with more research first).

What Is a Hidden Benefit of Drugs Like Ozempic?

We asked three experts, and all three brought up this one benefit: "Some individuals on semaglutide or tirzepatide report less interest in alcohol," says Dr. Katherine H. Saunders, MD, DABOM, an obesity expert, co-founder of Intellihealth and a clinical assistant professor of Medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine.

One provider has had patients tell her that Dry January is now a 12-month affair. "Some have even stopped drinking altogether," says Dr. Thais Aliabadi, MD, a board-certified OBGYN and CEO of weight loss treatment [Trimly](#).

Dr. Kumar has also heard of these purported benefits.

However, Dr. Saunders stresses the need for a big disclaimer. "This is a phenomenon I've seen in many, but not all, of my patients on semaglutide and tirzepatide," Dr. Saunders says. "We need more research to understand why this happens and how to predict which individuals will experience this."

That research, in particular, could lead to new uses for drugs like Ozempic down the road.

"It's absolutely possible that certain GLP-1 receptor agonists could receive an FDA indication for alcohol use disorder or other forms of addiction," Dr. Saunders says. "For this to happen, we need to prove efficacy and safety in clinical trials that are specifically designed to investigate these outcomes."

Why Might Weight Loss and Diabetes Drugs Lower Alcohol Cravings?

It's not clear that they do, and more research is needed on the topic. However, providers are hearing from patients that taking drugs like Ozempic and Wegovy has reduced cravings for alcohol.

"Semaglutide and tirzepatide enable people to have less interest in food," Dr. Saunders says. "This can help with smaller portion sizes and healthier food choices. The pathways that lead to food cravings may overlap with the pathways that lead to alcohol cravings."

Dr. Aliabadi also points to research that GLP-1 lowers dopamine, a neurotransmitter that plays a role in how we experience pleasure.

"So, the motivation to eat more, drink more, or even smoke or shop is greatly reduced," Dr. Aliabadi says. "Patients report that their appetite and cravings are reduced all around."

Other Benefits of Drugs Like Ozempic

It's still unclear whether Ozempic and drugs similar to it can reduce alcohol cravings. However,

other benefits have more research behind them. “Known benefits include blood sugar control, weight loss, improvement in cholesterol, reduction in waist circumference, reduction in inflammation and reduction in heart disease,” Dr. Kumar says.

Indeed, research from a 2021 trial of nearly 2,000 people found that people who took once-weekly 2.4 mg of semaglutide (the dosing for Wegovy) lost around 15% of their weight. More recent trials for Zepbound showed that people taking the drug for 88 weeks saw an average weight loss of 26%.

A new study suggested a once-weekly 2.4 mg injection of a semaglutide like Wegovy could reduce the risk of major adverse cardiovascular events by 20%. In October, Novo Nordisk, which makes Wegovy and Ozempic, said it was stopping its study on whether the drugs could effectively treat kidney failure in patients with diabetes, saying it was clear the medication would be successful.

What Should People Who Want To Take a Drug Like Ozempic Do?

Talk to your doctor. “Speak with your primary care provider if the provider is qualified,” Dr. Saunders says. “Otherwise, find a medical obesity specialist.”

Remember, weight loss results may vary; no drug is a magic solution.

“Keep in mind that obesity treatment isn’t just about one highly effective medication,” Dr. Saunders says. “There’s no one-size-fits-all treatment for obesity.”

Sources

- Dr. Rekha Kumar, MD, a practicing endocrinologist and CMO at Found
- Katherine H. Saunders, MD, DABOM, an obesity expert, co-founder of Intellihealth and a clinical assistant professor of Medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine
- Dr. Thais Aliabadi, MD, a board-certified OBGYN and CEO of weight loss treatment Trimly

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