

Taking a GLP-1? Doctors Say Not To Forget About Movement and Mental Health

Doctors say it takes more than a regular shot for patients to achieve their weight goals in the long run.

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Severe ankle pain drove Jelton Smart to start taking a weight loss injection a year and a half ago.

Smart was 285 pounds and worked as a caterer in Savannah, Georgia. After she'd been standing on her feet for long hours, her ankles would be "as swollen as a football," she said. She was walking with a limp. An orthopedic doctor diagnosed her with Achilles tendinitis and recommended losing weight to mitigate the symptoms. Smart began taking the brand-name GLP-1 Ozempic.

The appetite suppression resulted in her shedding pounds quickly, at first.

"I lost 30 pounds initially without changing anything," said Smart, 48. But then she found herself unable to shed additional pounds.

GLP-1s have quickly become one of the most popular types of weight loss drug in America. Nearly one in five people have taken them at some point, [according to research from KFF](#), a health information nonprofit that includes KFF Health News. But doctors say it takes more than a regular shot for patients to achieve their weight goals in the long run.

Here's what to know.

The Old-School Rules of Weight Loss and Health Still Apply

Regular exercise, smart food choices, plenty of sleep — those basic, healthy lifestyle choices are not only going to help you lose weight on a weight loss drug but also help you keep it off, said Dafina Allen, an obesity medicine physician who runs a clinic in Saginaw, Michigan. For example, some people find that they eat less on a GLP-1, "but they're not improving their health because they're not exercising. They're not improving the quality of the food they're eating," Allen said. The path to weight loss is also guided by hormones, metabolism, and genetics.

After her weight loss on Ozempic plateaued, Smart realized she needed to start moving her body, too. “I’m in the gym now six days a week,” she said. “I went from 285 to 175” pounds. The swelling and pain in her ankle went away as well.

Mental Health Matters, Too

The mind and body are deeply connected. Food and body image can be especially emotional, Allen said. “I can tell you about the patients that I helped lose 50 pounds, that I helped lose 100 pounds, and they still look in the mirror and are not happy.”

The key is seeking help for mental health along the way, said Gerald Onuoha, who practices internal medicine in Nashville, Tennessee. “Making sure that you’re talking to people about your problems, whether it’s a family member or a licensed professional, I think goes a long way,” he said.

Work With a Doctor To Closely Monitor Your Dosage

Onuoha said people can run into serious problems if they increase their GLP-1 dosage too quickly or don’t follow the recommended schedule. He’s seen patients come to the hospital with pancreatitis, gallstones, or acute kidney injury. “I always ask patients that are on GLP-1s: How long have they been on them?” he said. “Are they adhering to the directions? Because those things determine whether or not you’re going to have those complications.”

Part of the issue, Allen said, is that GLP-1s are relatively easy to access — and often much cheaper — through online pharmacies or websites, but those providers may not educate patients about their dosage or side effects. “So they might just go online, find a random company that will ship it to their house, where they don’t even know what dose of the medication they’re taking, or even if the medicine is safe for them as the patient with the medical conditions they have,” she said.

People and Policy

GLP-1 drugs can be costly, and most insurance programs — public or private — don’t cover the medications for weight loss. Medicaid, the government program that covers 69 million Americans, covers GLP-1s for medically accepted conditions like diabetes, but only about a dozen state Medicaid programs cover GLP-1s for obesity treatment, [according to KFF](#). For older Americans with Medicare, the federal government is planning to allow temporary coverage of GLP-1s for weight loss starting in July.

Katherine Ruppelt at Nashville Public Radio contributed to this report.

HealthQ is a health series from reporters Cara Anthony and Blake Farmer, approachable guides to an unapproachable health care system. It’s a collaboration between Nashville Public Radio and KFF Health News.

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