

Courtesy of



Medications for Weight Loss

How can prescription drugs help people dealing with excess weight?

Why should I consider using these medications?

Most people who have used medications to help them lose weight report making better decisions about food, thinking about it less, and feeling more in control. These medicines work best when you use them with planned meals, exercise, and other healthy behavior changes.

How do weight loss medications work?

When people lose weight, their body begins sending signals to the brain that there is a decrease in stored energy. The brain then sends hormonal and chemical messages that increase appetite, hunger, and cravings. Losing weight and keeping it off is difficult because these signals last until the person has regained most of the weight back. Weight loss medications target these signals and decrease their effect.

Are weight loss medications safe?

Five weight loss medications are currently approved as safe by the FDA for long-term use (2 years). Many of these are undergoing even longer-term studies, including in patients with heart disease. Additional medications are approved for short-term use (less than 12 weeks). Using weight loss medications requires regular medical monitoring. There is no evidence that these medications are addictive.

Other benefits of medications

Most medications ultimately lead to decreased blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol levels because of the weight loss they cause. Some prevent diabetes.

Which medication is right for me?

Each of these medications has different benefits and side effects. They may cause problems with medicines you already take. Your healthcare provider can help you decide which is best for you. You might have to try several different medications until you get one that works well. The right medication will help you control portions, decrease snacking, and choose healthier food by decreasing your hunger or cravings.

When taking weight loss medications if you do not lose 5% of your starting weight in 3 months you need to stop taking them and discuss next steps with your healthcare provider.

Will I have to use them forever?

We are still learning about weight loss and keeping it off long term. Some people will benefit from using these medications to get started. Others may need to keep using them to maintain their weight loss. Talk to your healthcare provider about what is best for you.

What obesity medications are FDA approved?

Medications approved for long-term use			
Lorcaserin (Belviq)	1 pill a day	Targets centers in the brain to increase fullness	May cause headache, fatigue, dizziness
Naltrexone-bupropion (Contrave)	2 pills twice a day	Targets the brain to decrease hunger and food cravings	May cause nausea, constipation, headache, insomnia, increased blood pressure
Phentermine-topiramate (Qsymia)	1 pill a day	Targets centers in the brain involved in appetite and fullness	May cause dry mouth, insomnia, change in taste, tingling sensation, dizziness
Orlistat (Xenical/Alli OTC)	1 pill 3 times a day with meals	Decreases absorption of the fat you eat	May cause diarrhea, oily stools, gas
Liraglutide (Saxenda)	1 shot a day	Targets centers in the brain to decrease hunger and increase fullness	May cause nausea, constipation, diarrhea, vomiting, low blood sugar
Medications approved for short-term use			
Phentermine	Adipex, 1/2 to 1 pill a day Lomaira, 1 to 3 pills a day	Targets centers in the brain to decrease hunger	May cause dry mouth, constipation, insomnia, increased blood pressure

Domenica M. Rubino, Washington Center for Weight Management and Research, Arlington, Virginia, USA; Tareneh Soleymani, Summit Medical Group, Department of Nutrition Sciences, University of Alabama at Birmingham, USA; Scott Kahan, Department of Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

The Obesity Patient Page is a public service of The Obesity Society (TOS) and its Clinical Committee. These recommendations are appropriate in most instances, but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. Consult your healthcare provider for specific information concerning your personal medical condition. This page may be photocopied noncommercially by healthcare practitioners to share with patients. Healthcare practitioner is defined as being legally permitted to provide healthcare services and advice as defined by governing state laws and regulations. To purchase bulk reprints, call (781) 388-8507.

Disclosure: Members of the TOS Clinical Committee report consulting and other fees from Novo Nordisk and Eisai; contracted research relationships with Nutrasource and Janssen Pharmaceuticals; consulting fees from Takeda, Vivus, and Orexigen; and data safety monitoring board duties with Axio and Zafgen.