

Diabetics scramble to find drugs suddenly popular for a non-intended use: Weight loss

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Florida diabetics are struggling to buy prescription drugs to help control their blood sugar now that the medications have gone viral on social media as a weight-loss solution.

The demand from dieters for Ozempic, which is sold as a liquid solution administered as an under-the-skin injection, has caused shortages of the medication along with Trulicity, also an injectable diabetes medicine. The buzz has created serious issues for people who actually need the [prescribed medications](#) to control diabetes.

"We're getting calls from our patients who can't find it," said Dr. Jonathan Fialkow, a cardiologist at Baptist Health who works with diabetics with cardiovascular issues. "People need it for medical conditions, and pharmacies are out of it. The manufacturers aren't able to keep up."

Tabloids such as *The Sun* and magazines like *Glamour* have reported on rumors and social posts from influencers and celebrities who are slimming down with Ozempic, fueling interest in the diabetes drug among the general population. South Florida doctors say the interest picks up daily and report patients are calling who have no history of diabetes or pre-diabetes that are specifically asking for Ozempic for [weight loss](#).

"Ozempic is not a weight-loss medication," said Fialkow, who also is chief of cardiology at Miami Cardiac & Vascular Institute. "These medications need to be monitored by your doctor."

He said Ozempic turns off hunger, so people who take it for weight loss and stop could regain the pounds they lost, especially if they didn't make any lifestyle changes.

Ozempic was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 2017 for use in people with type 2 diabetes. Wegovy, made by the same manufacturer, was approved to treat obesity. Both Ozempic and Wegovy have semaglutide as their active ingredient and work similarly, but for different approved purposes.

Wegovy is sold at [higher doses](#) than Ozempic, and at a higher cost—about \$1,500 for a 30-day supply. It is less likely to be covered by insurance compared with Ozempic, which costs about \$1,000 for a 30-day supply. For seniors, Medicare does not cover weight-loss drugs.

The clamor started months ago when a clinical trial reported the class of medications as having a similar weight loss effect as bariatric surgery. In August, drug maker Novo Nordisk asked [healthcare providers](#) not to start new patients on Wegovy and halted shipments of the two lowest doses typically used as initial weight-loss treatments while it worked to catch up with demand. Pharmacists believe the unintended effect may be a heightened off-label demand for Ozempic for weight loss.

"We are watching the wholesalers as Ozempic goes in and out of stock," said Chris Osborne, owner of the Prescription Pad Pharmacy in Plantation. "Once they get it in, we place our order right away."

Osborne said he fills the prescription when patients hand it to him, but he believes diabetics who need it should take precedence. "Most of those I am seeing lately who want it are non-diabetics."

In Plantation, Dr. Mudit Jain of the Diabetes & Thyroid Care Center said there are no generic alternatives to Ozempic and Wegovy, so he tries to provide samples to patients who are desperate while they wait for pharmacies to restock. He is hopeful the supply will catch up by the end of the year.

Several brands in the same family of medicines such as Trulicity also are in demand. Osborne at Prescription Pad said people are using that diabetes medication off label for weight loss, too. "Some people want a quick fix. It's basically an injection a week."

Fialkow said after New York and Los Angeles, the South Florida area is

looks-conscious, which explains all the phone calls he gets asking for Ozempic. "South Florida is a center of vanity. But no one should take this medication unless it is prescribed by a doctor who can supervise its treatment."

While research shows the weight loss with Ozempic can be dramatic, the medicine comes with some risk.

Mild side effects include gastrointestinal problems like nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, and constipation. More [serious side effects](#) can include gallstones; kidney problems including kidney failure; swelling of the pancreas; increased risk of thyroid cancer; allergic reaction, and hypoglycemia (low [blood sugar](#)).

"I like to say, 'let's learn a little more at least while we wait until the supply kicks in' because right now people who need it can't get it," Fialkow said. "But you know, unfortunately many people won't wait."

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