

Regular feature: Exercise

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Weight loss medication: pros and cons for stoma patients

Weight loss injections such as Ozempic, Mounjaro and Wegovy are highly topical and controversial at the moment, so this article aims to take a balanced look at the pros and cons, safety and suitability of these drugs for anyone with a stoma. In writing this, I consulted with IA's Consultant Dietitian Sophie Medlin for a holistic approach to this rather thorny topic.

Ozempic, Wegovy (semaglutide) and Mounjaro (tirzepatide) are brand names for glucagon-like peptide-1 receptor agonists (GLP-1RAs), commonly prescribed for metabolic syndrome (diabetes). They work by mimicking the hormone GLP-1, which helps lower blood sugar levels, increase insulin secretion, suppress glucagon release, and reduce appetite.

For the general population, these medications have also shown consistent weight reduction, often 10–15% of total body weight or more, especially when combined with lifestyle changes. There have been many other reported benefits such as reduced risk of

cardiovascular events (heart attacks and stroke), reduced inflammation and improved kidney function.

They sound like a magical solution but there are numerous negative side effects, and we don't really know much about how safe they are for people living with a stoma. A search on the PubMed database discovered zero articles about stomas and GLP-1s.

Stomas, hernias and weight

The risk of parastomal hernia is significantly increased in people who are overweight (with a BMI of over 25 for clarity)

so one of the most important things to do when living with a stoma is to manage our weight and keep healthy. Most surgeons agree that stoma formation and hernia repairs are much more difficult on a larger abdomen and hernias are likely to come back in individuals who are overweight.

The topic of how to help patients lose weight was high on the agenda at a recent surgeon



conference I attended, and the conversation quickly turned to the prescribing of weight loss injections for stoma patients. Losing weight can be a prerequisite for hernia surgery and potentially for those trying to manage a hernia non-operatively.

Potential benefits of weight loss injections for people with a stoma

1. Improved stoma bag fit and function

Weight loss in people who are overweight can reduce abdominal girth, allowing for a better fit of the stoma bag, which may:

- Decrease leakage
- Improve comfort
- Reduce skin irritation around the stoma

This benefit is particularly important for those who struggle with stoma bag adhesion due to body contours caused by excess weight.

2. Reduced risk of parastomal hernias and management of an existing hernia

Obesity is a known risk factor for parastomal hernias. Weight loss can reduce intra-abdominal pressure, reducing visceral and subcutaneous fat around the abdomen; and may help prevent or slow the progression of hernias.

3. Improved metabolic health

Many people with stomas also live with chronic diseases like type 2 diabetes, hypertension, or heart disease. Weight loss medications are also showing evidence of:

- Improved insulin sensitivity
- Lowered blood pressure
- Improved cholesterol profiles

The benefits of these drugs may extend beyond weight loss to overall disease management.

4. Mental and emotional benefits

Weight loss may improve self-esteem, energy levels, and mental health. And if you're someone who's struggling with your weight alongside your stoma, successful weight reduction can be empowering.

And drawbacks...

Despite the promises, we know very little about the side effects and safety for individuals with a stoma. So, although some surgeons and many doctors are recommending these drugs and people are using them, we urge caution and full consideration of any potential side effects, which may include:

1. Gastrointestinal issues

Most GLP-1s cause gastrointestinal side effects including nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramping, slow transit and constipation or diarrhoea. We really need to consider how appropriate it is to prescribe GLP-1s to anyone who's had bowel surgery, a bowel disease or living with an ongoing bowel condition.

In someone with a stoma, these side effects may disrupt already problematic digestion issues and lead to:

- Increased or erratic stoma output (especially in ileostomy patients)
- Potential for blockages – either at the stoma level or internally around any adhesions
- Risk of dehydration and electrolyte imbalances



- Greater appliance management challenges
- Constipation could increase the risk of hernia in those with a colostomy and also urostomy due to straining

2. Nutrient malabsorption and deficiency

People with ileostomies are already at risk for malabsorption of nutrients, especially vitamin B12, iron, and fat-soluble vitamins. Weight loss medications that suppress appetite or alter digestion may reduce food intake and nutrient availability even further.

Long-term use without careful nutritional monitoring could lead to deficiencies that affect immune function, energy levels, and healing. This is also one of the bigger concerns for people using medication to lose weight for surgery. We need to be going into surgery well-nourished and healthy to optimise healing, rather than malnourished. This is a significant concern.

3. Hydration challenges

Many weight loss drugs cause delayed gastric emptying, increased diarrhoea or reduce thirst, potentially compounding the risk of dehydration – particularly problematic for people with an ileostomy.

Dehydration can lead to:

- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Kidney stress or failure
- Hospitalisation in severe cases

4. Rapid weight loss and muscle loss

As an exercise specialist, this, for me, is the most concerning issue. Yes, we want weight loss, but

not so rapid that we lose precious muscle mass. Muscle is incredibly important for our metabolic health, osteoporosis risk and many other aspects of wellbeing, and also our core strength. It's estimated that 50% of weight loss comes from muscle when on medication, which simply cannot be a good thing, especially in someone who may be dealing with a chronic illness.

Rapid loss of muscle can lead to symptoms of:

- Weakness
- Fatigue
- Loss of independence
- Poor healing and recovery from future surgeries



In people with stomas – who may already have issues with digestion and body composition – this risk is amplified.

There's also the possibility that less muscle around the torso and abdominal wall could actually increase the risk of hernia rather than decrease it. More research is needed on this.

It's possible that regular weight training alongside using medication could offset some of this muscle loss and this should be an absolute priority for anyone using it.

Important considerations before starting medication

For anyone with a stoma contemplating weight loss drugs, medical supervision is essential. Consider the following steps:

Consult a gastroenterologist or stoma nurse:

Ensure that the type of stoma, surgical history, and current GI health are compatible with medication use.

Work with a registered dietitian: Monitor nutrient intake, hydration status, and any side effects that might interfere with digestion.

Track stoma output: Changes in volume, consistency, or frequency may signal adverse reactions or poor adaptation to the drug.

Start low, go slow: If prescribed, begin with the lowest effective dose and increase gradually under close medical supervision.

Assess other factors: Is the weight gain recent and linked to medication, surgery, or lifestyle change? Could alternative approaches – like physical therapy or behavioural support – be more sustainable?



Alternative approaches to weight management

While drugs may offer a solution for some, many people can successfully lose weight with non-pharmacological interventions, including:

Dietary adjustments: Emphasising nutrient-dense, low-residue, and easily digestible foods. It's possible that liquid meal replacements could be a viable option for some people but discuss this with a dietitian.

Physical activity: increase exercise and physical activity levels aiming for WHO guidelines of at least 150 minutes per week including two sessions of strength training.

Psychological support: Counselling or support groups for body image, food relationship, and motivation.

A balancing act

Weight loss medications may offer promising

benefits, particularly when excess weight contributes to appliance problems, metabolic disease, or hernia risk. However, the unique digestive and nutritional challenges of someone with a stoma require a cautious and personalised approach.

What works for the general population may not translate safely or effectively for people with altered anatomy of the digestive system. Stoma patients considering weight loss drugs should work closely with a multidisciplinary team – including doctors, dietitians, and stoma care specialists – to weigh the risks and benefits carefully.

Important note: While these medications are widely and easily available online at present, we would strongly deter anyone with a stoma from purchasing them without the appropriate go-ahead from their surgical team who know their anatomy and additional risk factors.

Ultimately, the goal should be not just weight loss, but sustainable health, wellbeing, and quality of life.

Resources: CityDietitians – Sophie Medlin – Consultant Dietitian, www.citydietitians.co.uk; The Ostomy Studio – Sarah Russell – Exercise Consultant, www.theostomystudio.co.uk; NHS – www.nhs.uk/better-health/lose-weight

Disclaimer

This article does not constitute medical advice, it is for information purposes only. It does not replace individual advice given to you by your doctor or other healthcare professional.

- *With thanks to Dietitian Sophie Medlin for her help with this article.*