



Supercharged by Social Media, the GLP-1 Boom Is Warping Teen Psyches

The rapid rise of weight-loss drugs is affecting the way Gen Alpha and the youngest Gen Zers think about health and body image, setting some of them up for a lifetime of struggles.

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In 2024, Amelia Cate Prosser remembers feeling as if GLP-1 drugs were suddenly everywhere: stashed in her friends' parents' refrigerators, glorified on the red carpet and dominating the cafeteria conversations at her private all-girls high school in Melbourne. But it was on social media where the noise was — and continues to be — the loudest.

The teen says she could hardly open an app without being bombarded with posts and advertisements about weight-loss

injections. Impeccably sculpted models in sports bras warning that sometimes “effort alone isn’t enough” crowded her feeds; so did before-and-after images glamorizing other young women’s rapidly transformed physiques. (Were they AI-generated? Hard to know.) It was around that time that Prosser, now 17, says she developed anorexia and, later, bulimia. “My friends and people I know, we’ve all lost track of what a normal, healthy, especially female body looks like,” says Prosser, who’d used a fake birthday to sign up for adult social media accounts, instead of the more restrictive teen ones. “Whether we say it out loud or not, it’s a very known thing that we all would like to look like that.”

In the past few years, weight-loss drugs have exploded in popularity, with roughly 1 in 8 Americans age 18 and older currently taking one. And though the numbers aren’t as high for kids, use among them has also boomed: Clinicians wrote roughly 33,000 prescriptions for Wegovy and Zepbound last year in the US for people under 18, according to an analysis by Komodo Health, a data analytics company, for *Bloomberg Businessweek*. Originally developed by [Novo Nordisk A/S](#) and [Eli Lilly & Co.](#) to treat diabetes, this class of medications has been life-changing for millions of patients with a wide range of diagnoses, including obesity, sleep apnea and heart disease, often with relatively few side effects.

But their pervasive use and cultural ubiquity, not to mention the potentially dangerous knockoffs widely available online, are causing at least one major side effect: It’s warping the way Gen Alpha and the youngest Gen Zers think about health, weight and acceptance at a formative age. Increasingly, social media and even artificial intelligence are influencing these ideas, and experts warn that the effects could be harmful and long-lasting.

Almost every teen girl *Businessweek* interviewed for this article said they know of peers taking GLP-1s with no clear medical need for it, some of whom are even experimenting with leftovers taken from friends or family members. Some say they see the drugs as a cheat code to avoid exercise and healthy eating or as an easy antidote if they put on unwanted weight. Several mentioned GLP-1s as a possible remedy for the common hormonal disorder polycystic ovary syndrome, though the US Food and Drug Administration hasn't specifically approved them to treat it. At least one teen said she believes starting the drugs young will improve her fertility and chances of eventually becoming a mother, an idea pushed online that has yet to be proven in large-scale clinical trials. Others say getting thinner has helped girls they know impress crushes or win the approval of parents who want them to be prettier.

"We've normalized it into this vanity thing," says Bella Shelton, a 19-year-old student at the University of Utah who first saw the drugs infiltrate her cohort as a 16-year-old high school cheerleader. She says she recalls one teammate's mother forcing her to go on a GLP-1 against her will. "Seeing all these girls around me, I was like, 'Well, is this something I should do?'"

"Are they trying to shove it in my face for a reason?"

Some teens say they've become intrigued by GLP-1s after seeing celebrities they admire and never considered overweight promoting them, like [Serena Williams](#). Reality shows such as *The Kardashians* — whose business empire includes a [viral supplements brand](#) offering "GLP-1 production and weight management" edibles and others pledging to speed up metabolism, curb cravings and smooth cellulite — have further fed the craze.

Olivia Stepanow, a 16-year-old in Houston who says she's regularly called "fat ass" by boys at school, says the steady drumbeat of GLP-1 ads pushed to her while watching reality television on her mother's streaming accounts has made her question whether she should change her body. "Are they trying to shove it in my face for a reason?" she says of the ads, mostly from telehealth platform [Hims & Hers Inc.](#), that she sees constantly touting the shots and pills. "Sometimes, I get caught in my head, and I'm like, 'I should just do it and look the way that I want to look.'"

Hims says it doesn't advertise to minors directly, nor does it provide weight-loss services to them. "In my experience as an obesity medicine physician for more than 20 years, GLP-1s themselves are not the source of unrealistic beauty standards," says Craig Primack, head of weight loss at Hims & Hers. "For decades, teenagers have been subject to relentless pressure to be perfect from all kinds of media."

To be sure, teens in almost every era have had to navigate their own generational pressures of wanting "the perfect body": Baby boomers idolized the British model Dame Lesley Lawson, better known as Twiggy; Gen X had Kate Moss; and millennials yearned to achieve "Y2K skinny" standards, with the body-positivity movement of the 2010s proving short-lived. But the collision of weight-loss drugs, AI and social media has put today's young people in a uniquely dangerous position. Teens can't always decipher online what's real and what's not, and plenty of products are accessible without a prescription or an age verification.

Young people who start the drugs now, even under the care of a doctor, might very well be on them for the next 70 years or more, an expensive proposition because insurance doesn't typically cover compounded weight-loss drugs. For some, paying potentially thousands of dollars out of pocket a year could add up to lifetime tabs well into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. There is also little research on the long-term effects of starting GLP-1s while the brain and body are still growing. Whether or not they'd care to admit it, Big Pharma giants and smaller telehealth startups alike stand to benefit from having ever-younger consumers on drugs intended to be taken for life. Teens have become a particularly lucrative market for companies that prescribe medication over video chat or

direct messaging and ship it by mail. These businesses are increasingly positioning weight-loss drugs not as medicines for obesity but as cosmetic elixirs for anyone hoping to shed a few pounds.

“It makes me feel sad, because it’s taken so many years of my life, hating myself in the mirror”

Doctors are especially concerned that [screening for eating disorders](#) hasn’t kept pace with the number of prescriptions being written for teens. “We’re celebrating weight loss loudly and publicly again, and it’s just created this whole noise that is virtually inescapable for our teens today,” says psychologist Jessie Menzel, vice president for clinical programs at Equip, a telehealth startup that treats people with eating disorders. The company says it’s seeing patients as young as 11 getting their hands on weight-loss drugs when they don’t need them. Some patients are coming to Equip after taking a parent’s GLP-1 drugs or buying them online using fake birthdays or through overseas sellers that don’t require prescriptions, says Jamie Drago, a peer mentor at the company. Young patients say they’re learning about the drugs from influencers as “[looksmaxxing](#)” trends take off online and the deluge of social media content makes it seem as if “everyone is doing it,” Drago says. Boys have been affected, but the noise is really taking a toll on girls.

“When you go on social media, you want to keep scrolling, and if everything that you’re being recommended because you’re a young girl is, ‘You should lose weight, you should get skinny, and you should go on Ozempic,’ if you’re constantly consuming that, that definitely has added to my mental overwhelm,” says Jessica Johnson, 19. She developed an eating disorder at 16, a key reason she dropped out of high school near Vancouver. “It makes me feel sad, because it’s taken so many years of my life, hating myself in the mirror.”

Although the issue spans Instagram and YouTube, TikTok has become social media’s ground zero for weight-loss drug hype. The video app’s young user base, notoriously potent algorithm and e-commerce prowess through TikTok Shop — a top destination for supplements and so-called wellness products — have put the platform in a league of its own, making it fertile ground for telehealth upstarts, brands and influencers peddling their products and services.

A spokesperson for TikTok US said in an email that the company prohibits posts, including sponsored content, showing disordered eating or dangerous weight-loss behaviors for all users and shows ad content about weight-loss or muscle-gain claims only to users 18 and older. [Meta Platforms Inc.](#)’s Instagram doesn’t allow content that encourages eating disorders or contains instructions for extreme weight-loss behaviors, a Meta spokesperson said in an email; additional rules apply to teens under 18, including prohibiting showing them ads for weight-loss products or services. A spokesperson for YouTube, which is owned by [Alphabet Inc.](#), said in an email that it blocks ads for weight-loss products and prescription drugs and limits how often it suggests “videos that idealize specific body types” when the user is a child or teen. “We design YouTube to protect the health and well-being of young people,” the spokesperson said.

Still, even though companies have [taken steps to protect users](#) and crack down on some problematic content and misleading marketing, creators have easily found workarounds — and teens know how to find them. The hashtag #WIEIAD (short for “what I eat in a day”) has become a prominent portal to female-centric GLP-1 content on TikTok; other posts celebrate “teen wl” (or “teen weight loss”). After engaging with this type of material even once or twice, teens say, it becomes inescapable in their TikTok feeds.

They quickly learn what to search to discover harder-to-find content, using ever-evolving “algospeak” lingo like “zemp,” “z3mp,” “sk!nnytok” and “Dooop” — the last one a misspelling of “dupe,” meaning knockoffs or counterfeits, intended to get around restrictions. Some written AI summaries pulled up on TikTok’s popular search function, which young people use like Google or ChatGPT, offer tips on

what to say to a doctor to try to get a prescription for a GLP-1 and how to push back when a doctor says no. Queries for GLP-1 transformations and [peptide injections](#) were among the top searches in July among all TikTok users, according to its in-app insights hub for creators. (Some TikTok searches pull up resources for people suffering from eating disorders, the TikTok US spokesperson noted.)

The FDA, which oversees drug marketing, has [taken steps to rein in deceptive advertising](#) for top-selling drugs, including GLP-1s. That includes issuing “more than 100 warning letters to telehealth companies regarding its concerns on false or misleading claims” as well as sending “compliance letters to the sponsors of prescription drug products for false or misleading promotional communications on social media,” a spokesperson for the FDA said in an email. It’s also flagged to TikTok false or misleading claims on its platform, the spokesperson said. “The agency will continue to take action to protect consumers from false and misleading claims regarding GLP-1 products.”

Yet enforcing regulations on social media is an uphill battle. Guidance hasn’t kept up with the rapidly changing landscape, new posts are popping up all the time, and the rules themselves can be murky. On TikTok, for instance, the platform prohibits the sale of prescription drugs through its shop, and products with “GLP,” “GLP-1” or similar terms in the title or branding are prohibited. But products marketed as supporting individuals on GLP-1 medications are allowed — and proliferating.

Back in Australia, where social media was recently banned for anyone under 16, Prosser has recovered from her eating disorder. Still, the round-the-clock barrage of social content and ads pushing weight loss — in addition to endless images and videos that AI generates or alters — made her journey back to health far harder and more painful.

“Our algorithms are out to get us,” she says. “You can’t blame it on them directly for causing your problems, but they definitely perpetuate it.”