# Weight-suppressant drugs spark debate amid obesity concerns in Ireland



The debate over the increasing use of weight-suppressant drugs, specifically GLP-1 agonists, to combat obesity has gained prominence amid concerns about societal attitudes toward body weight and the rising prevalence of obesity in Ireland and globally. These medications, which mimic natural hormones to promote feelings of fullness, have been embraced by many, as reflected in frequent social media posts showcasing weight loss achievements. However, health experts and policymakers are scrutinising the implications of widespread drug use, side effects, costs, and broader public health strategies.

Obesity, a complex condition influenced by genetics, disordered eating, socioeconomic factors, and brain regulation, has been exacerbated by the pervasive presence of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) in the modern diet. These foods, heavily marketed by transnational companies, are identified by scientists as a key driver of obesity and related chronic diseases such as diabetes. The response in many cases has been to focus on pharmaceutical solutions rather than addressing underlying food culture issues.

Ireland faces particular challenges with obesity, as there are over one million people classified as obese. The medications Wegovy (semaglutide) and Mounjaro (tirzepatide) are currently under review for reimbursement under State-funded health schemes. Professor Michael Barry, clinical director of The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, raised critical questions about the allocation of funding for these drugs: "Do we fund them [the drugs] or fund them only for a subgroup of people?" This highlights the difficult policy decisions balancing efficacy, demand, and financial cost.

The Irish Medical Organisation (IMO) recently discussed at their conference how funding weight loss drugs for all eligible patients could potentially double the State’s medicines bill. Given the scale of the problem, such expenditure raises concerns about diverting resources from other essential health services. The costs and long-term sustainability of medication-dependent weight management are under scrutiny, particularly since current evidence suggests patients must remain on these drugs long term to maintain weight loss. Common side effects include gastrointestinal issues such as vomiting and diarrhoea, constipation, hair loss, and in severe cases, inflammation of the pancreas. Legal actions in the United States related to side effects are ongoing, with questions about liability pending.

In contrast with Ireland, recent policy decisions in the United States show a different approach. In a notable reversal, the Trump Administration announced that Medicare and Medicaid would not cover anti-obesity drugs, a plan initially supported by the Biden Administration but subsequently criticised by figures including Health Secretary Robert F Kennedy.

The global context underscores the urgency of obesity as a public health crisis. A report by the Global Burden of Disease Collaborators reveals that rates of overweight and obesity have increased in all nations from 1990 to 2021, with childhood and adolescent obesity nearly tripling in that time.

Public health experts advocate for broader preventive measures such as restricting the marketing and sale of UPFs, particularly to children. Attempts to ban sales of sugary drinks and sweets to children have faced resistance internationally, with enforcement challenges evident in places like Southern Mexico. In Ireland, sugary soft drinks remain popular, with Coca-Cola leading sales despite containing high levels of sugar—one 12-ounce can has 39 grams, equating to roughly ten teaspoons.

Concerns about food quality extend to institutional settings. The HSE’s National Clinical Lead for obesity, Donal O’Shea, highlighted issues with ultra-processed foods being included in school meals for nearly half a million children. In response, Minister for Social Protection Dara Calleary committed to removing products high in fat, salt, and sugar from these meals.

While weight loss drugs represent a revolutionary advancement in health management, the focus remains firmly on preventing excessive weight gain through food culture reform and regulation of UPF producers. Discussions continue about how to implement effective public health policies to tackle obesity, particularly among children, balancing pharmaceutical interventions with sustainable prevention strategies. The Irish Examiner is reporting on these ongoing developments in Ireland's health policy landscape.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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