

Triple dose of Novo drug boosts weight loss

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Tripling the dose of Novo Nordisk's obesity treatment led to increased weight loss in patients during a clinical trial, boosting the company's aim to broaden treatment options and stay competitive with Eli Lilly's rival drug.

Semaglutide, marketed as Wegovy for weight loss and Ozempic to treat diabetes, delivered promising results in two late-stage clinical trials testing a 7.2mg dose of the drug. The maximum approved dose is currently 2.4mg.

Patients in the larger of the two trials lost an average of 19 per cent of their body weight after 72 weeks, compared with 16 per cent on the 2.4mg dose and 4 per cent on placebo.

The results fell short of the market leader tirzepatide, sold by Eli Lilly as Zepbound and Mounjaro, which reported average weight loss of as much as 22.5 per cent in trials of its highest approved dose. Lilly raised the UK price

of Mounjaro by up to 170 per cent recently.

Naveed Sattar, professor of metabolic medicine at the University of Glasgow, who was not involved in the study, said: "This incremental benefit is clinically meaningful, especially as the cost of higher-dose tirzepatide has risen considerably in some regions. If priced competitively, semaglutide 7.2mg could represent a more affordable alternative."

Investors have been looking for Novo Nordisk to bolster its pipeline of obesity drugs, with many regarding Lilly as having more potential options for patients in clinical trials. The latest data suggests that incremental gains remain possible from semaglutide.

Novo has lost ground in the US market to Lilly and replica "compounded" drugs. Shares in the group have fallen 60 per cent in the past year and it ousted its chief executive in May. It recently announced plans to cut 9,000 jobs.

The higher dose did not increase

serious side effects or trial dropouts. However, more patients taking the 7.2mg dose experienced gastrointestinal symptoms, about 71 per cent compared with 61 per cent on the current dose.

More than one in five patients on the higher dose experienced dysaesthesia, altered and sometimes painful skin sensations, which often required temporary dose reductions, more than the 6 per cent in the 2.4mg dose group.

The STEP-UP and STEPUP2D trials are the first to test whether tripling the approved dose of semaglutide would lead to more weight loss. In the larger STEP-UP study, involving about 1,400 adults with obesity, nearly half of those on the 7.2mg dose lost more than 20 per cent of their weight, with one in three losing at least 25 per cent.

A smaller trial in people with obesity and type 2 diabetes reported 13 per cent weight loss with the higher dose, compared with 10 per cent on the standard dose and 4 per cent on placebo.