

Weight is finally over for millions of obese Indians

India

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It was when a cancer patient suggested she try weight-loss drugs that Anisa Iyer first learnt the name Ozempic.

But then Iyer, 32, a nurse at a private hospital in Delhi who had been obese for years, learnt that the drug cost £200 to £300 a month. "We're a middle-class family," she said. "We don't have the means. Only the rich can afford to spend that much."

That changed this month. The Danish drugmaker Novo Nordisk's patent for semaglutide, the active ingredient in its weight-loss drugs Wegovy and Ozempic, expired in India on March 20, meaning drug companies can roll out generic versions.

Forty Indian companies are expected to launch their own versions of semaglutide. First was Natco Pharma, which launched its drug the day after semaglutide came off patent, pricing it at £12 for a low dose. Later the same day,

Sun Pharma, Dr Reddy's and Glenmark launched their versions, and smaller doses cost as little as £3 for a week's supply. The highest doses will sell for about £9 to £20 for a week's supply.

Given the cut-throat competition expected as companies vie for a share of a massive market, the price is expected to fall even further.

An estimated 250 million Indians are obese and the number is expected to rise to 440 million by 2050, according to the Lancet medical journal. India also is the "diabetes capital" of the world, with more than 100 million diabetics.

In a poor country such as India, where 35 per cent of children under five are undernourished, economists call the co-existence of over and undernutrition the "nutrition transition". Meals are soaked in oil and packed with carbohydrates. The penchant for sweets is deep rooted and the love for processed food is widespread. A largely sedentary lifestyle, particularly in urban areas, is adding to high obesity rates.

Narendra Modi, the prime minister, was so alarmed by the obesity numbers that he appealed to Indians last year to "reduce the intake of cooking oil by 10 per cent in your daily diet".

For affluent Indians, the price of weight-loss drugs has not been an issue. Rukhsana Mustafa, who is in her early seventies and lives in Bangalore, finally relented under pressure from her daughter, who lives in the US, and started Mounjaro three months ago. "It was hell," she said. "I was nauseous all day and every day for three months. The moment I began to feel slightly better, it was time for the next injection. I stopped it. It's not worth it."

Dr Hemant Saluja, a GP in Delhi, said: "These drugs are fairly new and the scientific data on the impact they can have, say ten years down the line, isn't there. Just because a patent has expired, it doesn't mean the drug is safe and this drug, moreover, is for life."

However, Anoop Jain, a PR consultant, said the long-term effects were

irrelevant. "Ozempic has done wonders for me," he said. "It's controlled my diabetes to perfection and the added benefit of losing weight has reduced my joint pain and just improved how I feel overall. Long term, well, what does long term mean for me? I'm 67."

The expected drug boom raises the question of abuse as many chemists ignore rules against supplying certain drugs without prescriptions.

Dr Ambrish Mithal, a prominent endocrinologist, said misuse was already prevalent. "Government guidelines say only physicians and endocrinologists can prescribe these drugs," he said. "Portugal has made it a rule that only specialist doctors can prescribe it and we too will have to implement regulations strictly now that the generic version is being rolled out."

He said he had noticed people thought they could monitor the drug's effects without medical supervision. "But these are not cosmetic agents. They are powerful drugs, not magic pills."