

MORE than 1.5million people in the UK now use the new weight-loss jabs, according to latest estimates – with benefits for their physical and mental wellbeing.

Indeed, people with diabetes who took the drugs (known as GLP-1 agonists) had a lower risk of developing 42 diseases including a 22 per cent lower risk of a cardiac arrest, according to a recent study in *Nature Medicine*.

But that's not the whole story. Concerns are growing about the side-effects – two weeks ago, the Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) reported a rising number of cases of acute pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas) in the UK, which – although rare – is potentially lethal.

In fact, GLP-1 medications are linked to as many as 20 negative health outcomes, according to a recent study led by Professor Ziyad Al-Aly, director of clinical epidemiology at the VA St Louis Health Care System in the US. These range from sudden fainting to kidney problems and arthritic disorders, the journal *Nature* reported.

Although most people reported mild to moderate symptoms, in some cases these were severe.

Professor Al-Aly says he wasn't surprised by the range of effects: 'GLP-1 receptors are present all around the body – including the brain.'

'The drug leads to profound weight loss, and, as well as fat, people lose bone and muscle mass – and may become deficient in micronutrients. This may explain the broad side-effect profile.'

'But for some people living with massive obesity, the benefit of weight loss and improved cardiovascular risk will outweigh the risks', he adds.

'However, for others who may not need to be on GLP-1 drugs – including people who take it to look good on the red carpet – the risks may not be justified.'

More research is needed on the long-term risks of taking these medications for weight loss, adds Ahmed Ahmed, a consultant bariatric surgeon and president of the British Obesity and Metabolic Specialist Society.

'GLP-1 medications are useful for weight loss, but they are quite new for this indication (unlike for diabetes, for which they were developed) and the long-term side-effects of taking them in this way remain to be seen.'

He points out that many people regain all the weight once they come off the drugs, which has its own health implications.

Professor Al-Aly agrees: 'We need to know a lot more.'

Here, experts reveal what we currently know about how the drugs might harm the body...

MUSCLE AND BONE LOSS

IT'S estimated that a third of the weight loss from the jabs is muscle and bone.

This may be because muscle proteins are broken down faster than they can be built, due to a reduction in nutrient intake.

This reduction in muscle power has a knock-on effect on bone.

Bones need physical stress to encourage new bone formation to replace old bone cells, explains Sammy Margo, a physiotherapist based in London.

'The reduction in muscle power – and at the same time, the drop in body weight – means less force is exerted on them.'

The older you are, the more likely you are to lose muscle and bone as you lose the pounds as you're continually losing muscle anyway after 50, she adds.

The good news is exercise can prevent this.

'Activities that put stress on bones stimulate extra calcium deposits and encourage

By THEA JOURDAN

bone-forming cells into action – resistance training such as squats or using resistance bands, and weight-bearing exercise such as brisk walking, are essential if you're using these medications.'

WEAK PELVIC FLOOR

'OZEMPIC vagina' is rapidly becoming a popular hashtag on social media. It refers to the visible sagging of the labia or vagina, caused by rapid weight loss.

'Ozempic vagina is not a medical diagnosis, but some people use it to refer to vulvovaginal changes while on a GLP-1 agonist,' Dr Sherry Ross, an associate professor of urology at the University of North Carolina, told *Good Health*.

'Rapid weight loss on any body part can affect the skin over the fatty tissue lost – including the lower belly, mons pubis, and inner and outer labia.'

It can affect all ages, although older women whose skin has already lost elasticity are more prone to it, she says.

Rapid weight loss can also cause the widespread loss of muscle mass, including the muscles that support the pelvic floor, adds Dr Ross, the author of *She-ology: The Definitive Guide To Women's Intimate Health*.

This raises the risk of a prolapse, urinary incontinence, and faecal and gas incontinence.

'Having any, or all, of these uncomfortable and embarrassing symptoms, can have a negative effect on sexual desire,' says Dr Ross – though, she adds, overall, weight loss may boost desire.

Sammy Margo's advice is for 'women to proactively strengthen their pelvic floor during rapid weight-loss periods' with pelvic floor exercises.

DEPRESSION

WHILE there's good evidence, certainly in people with diabetes, that GLP-1 drugs can reduce symptoms of depression (the exact mechanism isn't clear), a major study published in *Nature* last year suggested that the drugs may be linked to an increased risk of psychiatric disorders.

Analysis of studies involving more than 162,000 people taking GLP-1s found a 195 per cent higher risk of depression; 108 per cent increased risk for anxiety; and 106 per cent increased risk for suicidal behaviour.

The authors wrote: 'These findings underscore the critical need for physicians to thoroughly assess patient history' before prescribing the drugs.

PANCREATITIS

RECENT reports have linked the weight-loss jabs to acute pancreatitis, which may be due to the drugs overstimulating the exocrine duct cells in the pancreas to produce more digestive

From bone loss to premature ageing and 'Ozempic vagina'...how using fat jabs just to look good is fraught with health risks

juices – these can back up, leading to inflammation.

'Pancreatic inflammation is dangerous because the inflammatory process can cause complications such as cell death in the pancreas itself, potentially leading to sepsis and even death,' Dr Christian Macutkiewicz, a consultant general and hepato-pancreatic-biliary surgeon at Manchester Royal Infirmary, told *Good Health*.

'However, most cases are mild and self-limiting,' he says, adding that there is no evidence at the moment that one GLP-1 drug is worse than the other.

'Rarely, people who use weight-loss jabs can develop gallstones – while these don't usually cause symptoms, they can block the pancreatic duct, which can lead to inflammation of the pancreas.'

WRINKLES

RAPID weight loss can lead to sagging and looking more aged.

But 'Ozempic face', as it's known, can occur with rapid weight loss from any cause, says Omar Quaba, a consultant plastic surgeon based in Edinburgh.

'The facial changes result from rapid fat loss in fat pads, leading

to sunken cheeks, eyes, and temples, and making the bones of the face appear more prominent.'

As the skin sags, existing wrinkles may be accentuated – the folds around the nose can become more prominent, too, while the skin around the jawline becomes looser.

The effect is more pronounced in people with naturally leaner faces, or older adults with lower collagen levels, says Dr Quaba.

Menopausal and post-menopausal women are particularly vulnerable as almost a third of skin collagen is lost during the first five years after menopause.

'Fat loss in the face can be permanent, adds Dr Justine Hextall, a consultant dermatologist at the Tarrant Street Clinic in Sussex.

To minimise skin sagging, ensure weight loss is steady, around 0.5kg per week, suggests Dr Hextall.

'Ensure that a healthy, balanced diet is in place – with adequate nutrients, including protein.'

And make sure skin is protected against UV and pollution, as 'these will contribute to loss of collagen and skin ageing'.

She adds: 'Restoring volume with dermal fillers or fat transfer

will help and then, if necessary, individuals might want to consider surgery to lift skin and deeper tissues.'

Dr Quaba reports seeing an increase in patients seeking surgery for loose skin on their breasts, tummy and arms after significant, rapid weight loss.

HAIR LOSS

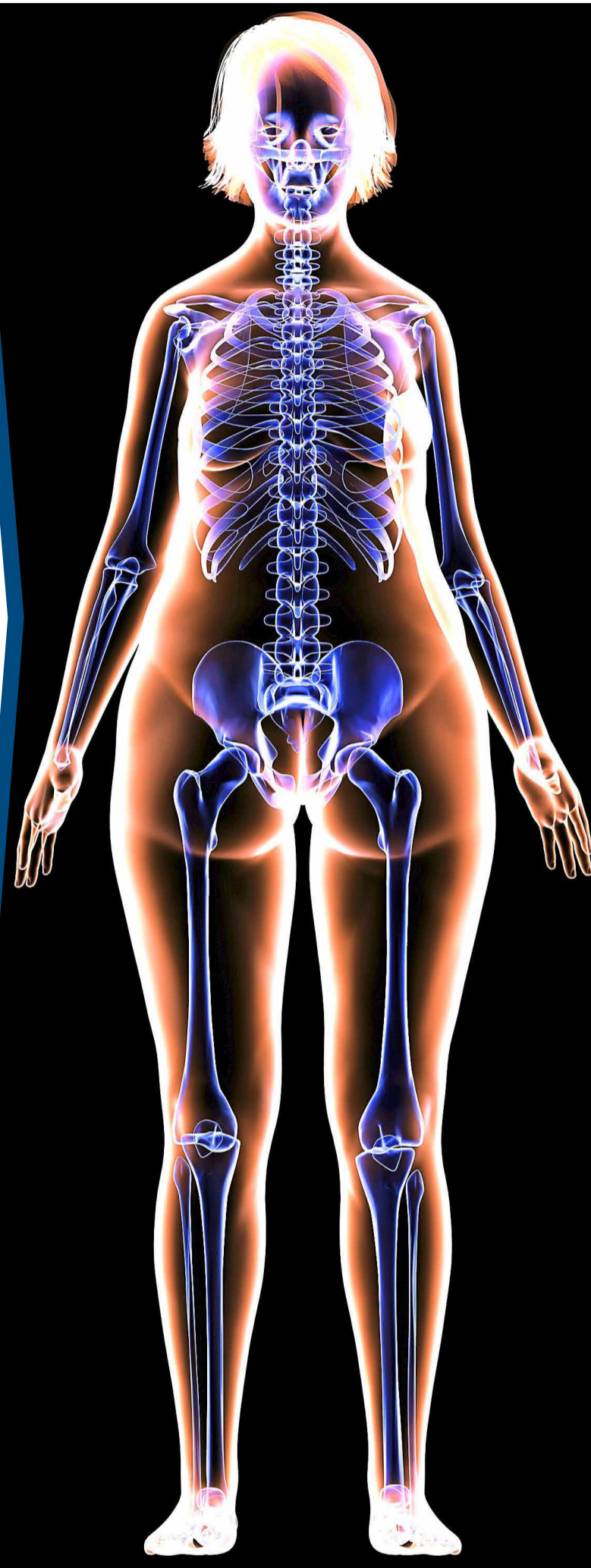
THE stress of rapid weight loss on your body can lead to temporary shedding of hair, a condition known as telogen effluvium.

As Stephen Carson, a trichologist based in North London, told *Good Health*: 'Any major change causing physical, emotional, nutritional and hormonal stress on the body can have this effect.'

'However, this is not permanent and once the stressor has been removed [i.e. stopping GLP-1s], normal hair growth will resume.'

Another form of hair loss he's seen in some people taking the jabs is alopecia areata, where the immune system attacks hair follicles causing bald patches.

'But again, I suspect that this was caused by the sudden shock of the weight loss,' says Stephen Carson. 'Alopecia areata can



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AS a GP I regularly see patients who've lost weight with one of the new 'miracle' weight-loss jabs such as Wegovy or Mounjaro – so when a 47-year-old teacher I've known for more than three decades bounced into my consulting room after losing nearly 5st, I naturally assumed this was the reason.

I nearly didn't recognise her – she'd been battling with her weight for years, but 18 months since I'd last seen her, she was the lightest she'd ever been, dropping from a dress size 28 to a 16. She was also brimming with confidence and energy. For the first time she could remember, she felt in control of her eating as her appetite had been reduced.

Imagine my delight to learn she'd managed this naturally – with no weight-loss jabs and no risk of side effects – by making simple modifications to her diet.

As an NHS GP with a special interest in helping people with obesity, I can understand the appeal of these jabs, despite the cost (nearly £200 a month). GLP-1 agonists mimic the effects of a natural hormone, glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1), which regulates blood sugar and appetite.

YET while the jabs certainly have impressive results, they can have side effects such as nausea and constipation, while others are being noted such as pancreatitis. And given that GLP-1 drugs have not been used at higher doses for weight loss for very long, others may emerge.

Occasionally, side effects are serious: one of my patients ended up in intensive care as the drug slowed her bowel down and it stopped functioning.

In addition, research shows they can often be a 'quick fix' that doesn't last – I've lost count of the number of patients whose weight crept back on once they stopped taking the drugs.

And yet you can boost your own production of the GLP-1 hormone naturally. This is effectively what my patient had done by switching to a low-carb diet.

In fact, I've seen this all before, having long had success helping patients with type 2 diabetes reverse their condition and reduce or avoid medications altogether by going low carb.

As I've previously written in the *Mail*, this involves swapping carbs such as rice, bread or potatoes for more nutrient-dense green vegetables and proteins such as fish, cheese or red meat.

Many of my patients have lost weight doing this and 151 to date have even reversed their type 2 diabetes with this approach.

How does it work? As with the

emptying, affecting how long food stays in the stomach and intestines.

But in some people this may initially trigger this process to speed up, says Mr Ahmed. 'Vomiting can also occur due to the impact of the drugs on stomach emptying.'

Constipation is another common side-effect. 'Food stays in the stomach and gut for longer, leading to harder stools and difficulty passing them,' says Mr Ahmed.

Rarely, constipation can lead to

complications, such as painful tears in the anus and piles.

'Ways to reduce this problem include staying hydrated to soften stools, and eating a high-fibre diet to bulk out stools and make them easier to pass,' says Mr Ahmed.

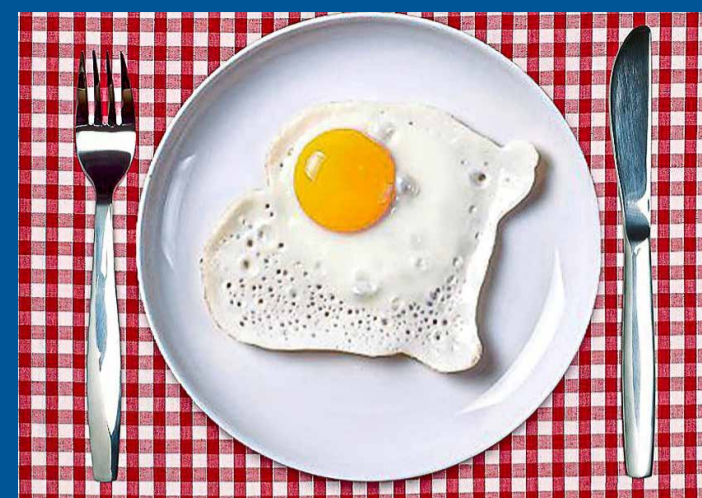
'Regular physical activity can help stimulate the digestive system and promote regular bowel movements.'

TOOTH DAMAGE
WHILE not a proven side-effect, there have been anecdotal reports

of poorer oral health or 'Ozempic teeth' – characterised by a dry mouth, bad breath and tooth damage – possibly because the drugs cause an environment that hastens tooth decay.

'Repeated vomiting (see above) could also damage the teeth, as 'stomach acid erodes the enamel', explains Mervyn Druian, a dentist at the London Centre for Cosmetic Dentistry.

'People using these medications should stay well-hydrated and sip water throughout the day.'



You can lose just as much weight without any side-effects (and it's free!)



By DR DAVID UNWIN

jabs, a low-carb diet seems to suppress hunger and my patients who've chosen this approach report a drop in appetite.

This is partly due to the fact that foods such as chicken, steak and vegetables are filling. A low-carb diet also leads to more stable blood sugar levels (carbohydrates rapidly break down into sugar), reducing hunger spikes and cravings. The body also produces less insulin (which clears sugar from the blood and stores it as fat) – and it switches to fat-burning mode.

This approach also helps boost your natural production of GLP-1 hormones. In fact, we knew about this well before the advent of the weight-loss 'wonder' drugs – thanks to a study published in the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* back in 2012.

When 18 healthy young men were allocated either to their normal diet or a low-carb diet, after only three days, the GLP-1

levels of the low-carb group were significantly higher – mimicking the way GLP-1 jabs work.

But could a low-carb diet help you to lose as much weight as a GLP-1 drug? I'm excited by the results of a new study I co-authored with Dr Tro Kalayjian (a specialist in obesity medicine in the US) which supports this.

Recently published in the journal *Frontiers in Nutrition*, the study showed that 41 of the 50 patients enrolled on a low-carb programme – who weighed an average of 19st 7lb (124kg) at the start – lost an average 3st (19.5kg) in a year.

'This works out at 15.5 per cent of their original body weight, which is actually better than the 14.9 per cent lost by patients using GLP-1 jabs after a year and four months, as reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2021.

Not only was the weight-loss faster, but the results can be long-lasting because you're retraining your eating habits.

Exercise can also boost GLP-1, possibly by improving blood supply to the gut and intestines, where GLP-1 is produced.

Of course, fat jabs appear to offer attractively rapid results – but research shows there might be a cheaper and safer way to naturally get the same results.

So why not give a low-carb diet and exercise a try first? You've got nothing to lose but the weight – and everything to gain.