

Starting Your GLP-1 Medication: A Patient Guide

You're making a meaningful investment in your health. This guide explains how your medication works and how to use it safely and effectively.

How This Medication Works

GLP-1 medications (such as semaglutide and tirzepatide) work by copying a natural hormone your gut releases after eating. This hormone signals your brain that you're full, slows down how quickly food leaves your stomach, and helps your body manage blood sugar more efficiently. The result is that you feel satisfied with smaller meals and experience fewer strong hunger cues between meals. Some of these medications also act on a second hormone pathway (GIP), which adds further benefit for blood sugar control and weight loss.

If You Are Using This Medication for PCOS

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is closely linked to insulin resistance, where your body's cells don't respond as well to insulin, prompting the body to produce even more. This can drive weight gain, irregular periods, and elevated androgen (male hormone) levels, which contribute to symptoms like acne or excess hair growth. GLP-1 medications can improve insulin sensitivity and support weight loss, both of which often lead to more regular cycles and improvement in other PCOS symptoms over time. This use is typically guided by your physician alongside — not in place of — other PCOS-directed treatments, and results vary from person to person.

Nutrition

Track your calories. A food-tracking app (such as MyFitnessPal) can make this easier.

- Men: aim for 1,800–2,000 calories per day
- Women: aim for 1,300–1,500 calories per day

These are general starting targets — your care team may adjust them based on your individual needs.

Hydration

Staying well-hydrated is one of the most important parts of this process. A simple guide: your urine should stay light or clear. Good hydration protects your kidneys and helps you feel more energized and satisfied. It's especially important if you're having nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea, since fluid losses add up quickly on this medication.

Protein

- Men: 150 grams per day
- Women: 100 grams per day

Eating protein with each meal helps preserve muscle while you lose fat, and it also helps you feel full longer.

Exercise

Walk for 45–60 minutes a day if you can. If that's not realistic yet, start with 10–15 minutes and add a few minutes every couple of days. Include some strength training as well — even light resistance exercise (bands, bodyweight, or weights) two to three times a week helps protect the muscle you have while you lose weight.

Protecting Your Muscle Mass

Keeping up your protein intake and exercise matters — without them, weight loss can come at the cost of muscle, leaving you feeling weak or unwell rather than healthy. We'll check your hormone levels between months 3 and 6 to help make sure your muscle mass is being preserved. Keeping your hormones in good balance is an important part of this process.

Common Side Effects

Most side effects come from the medication's effect on your digestive system and tend to be strongest right after starting or increasing your dose, then ease over time. These can include:

- Nausea (the most common)
- Vomiting or diarrhea
- Constipation
- Low appetite and fatigue

- Mild, temporary hair shedding during periods of rapid weight loss (this is related to the weight loss itself, not the medication directly, and typically resolves)

Managing Nausea

Nausea is the most common side effect of this medication. Not everyone experiences it, but if you do, we'll prescribe an anti-nausea medication (ondansetron) — please fill this prescription so it's on hand if you need it. Eating smaller, more frequent meals and avoiding very rich or greasy foods can also help reduce nausea.

How to take ondansetron: Place the tablet under your tongue and let it dissolve. After a few minutes, you can drink water and swallow anything that remains. You may take another dose every 6–8 hours if nausea continues.

Avoiding Reflux and Indigestion

This medication slows how quickly your stomach empties, so try to avoid eating late in the evening. Lying down on a full stomach raises your risk of reflux and indigestion. If you do experience these symptoms, an over-the-counter acid reducer (such as omeprazole) or an antacid (such as calcium carbonate) may help.

Who Should Use Extra Caution

Please make sure your care team knows if any of the following apply to you, as they may affect whether this medication is right for you:

- A personal or family history of medullary thyroid cancer or a condition called Multiple Endocrine Neoplasia type 2 (MEN2)
- A history of pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas)
- Gallbladder disease, or a history of gallstones
- A condition called gastroparesis (delayed stomach emptying)
- Diabetic eye disease (retinopathy)
- Pregnancy, or if you're planning to become pregnant — this medication is not recommended during pregnancy, and reliable contraception is important while taking it

Warning Signs That Need Immediate Medical Attention

Call your care team or seek emergency care right away if you notice:

- Severe, constant abdominal pain, especially if it spreads to your back — this can be a sign of pancreatitis
- Pain in the upper right side of your abdomen, yellowing of the skin or eyes, or fever — possible signs of a gallbladder problem
- Signs of a serious allergic reaction: facial or throat swelling, hives, or trouble breathing
- Signs of significant dehydration: dizziness, a fast heartbeat, or noticeably less urination, especially if you've had ongoing vomiting or diarrhea

Giving Yourself Injections

If you're self-administering your injections, clean the injection site thoroughly with an alcohol pad first, and rotate the site each time. Keep unopened medication refrigerated, and check your specific product's instructions for how long it can be safely kept at room temperature once you begin using it.

Setting Realistic Expectations

Your dose will typically be increased gradually over several weeks to months — this slow approach is intentional and helps limit side effects. Meaningful weight loss usually builds over months, not days, and it's normal to hit plateaus along the way. This medication works best as part of, not a replacement for, the nutrition and exercise habits described above. If the medication is stopped, appetite and weight may gradually return toward baseline unless the lifestyle changes are maintained — so think of this as a tool that supports lasting change, not a quick fix.

Follow-Up and Monitoring

We'll see you regularly to check your progress, adjust your dose if needed, and monitor for side effects. Please don't hesitate to reach out between visits with questions or concerns, text is best — this is a partnership, and small adjustments early on often make a big difference.