

# Semaglutide

**Brand Names: Ozempic; Wegovy (same agent).**



## Short version:

Semaglutide is generally very well tolerated as long as used carefully. The key is to start low and work your way up, but even then side effects can differ from person to person.

Generally they are gastrointestinal ranging from feeling "full" despite not having eaten, nausea, constipation or diarrhoea.

These can be managed either via a dose reduction while the body gets used to it, or with other medications in the short term if necessary whilst we work on finding the right dose for you.

Despite what some people are saying online it has not been found to have any direct psychological effects.

If side effects do occur to an unacceptable amount, wait until it wears off and then decrease the dose (half or less) and stick with that for a month before trying to go up in dose again.

## Detailed version:

### Warning

- This medication has been shown to cause thyroid cancer in some animals at high doses. This does not appear to happen in humans (and has been looked for specifically and carefully, so we'd probably know about it by now).
- To be safe though, do not use this medication if you have a health problem called Multiple Endocrine Neoplasia syndrome type 2 (MEN 2), or if you or a family member have had thyroid cancer.
- Whilst there was an initial concern that Semaglutide increases the risk of pancreatitis, this does not appear to be the case with over 5 years of real world data now.
- Rapid weight loss from any cause can increase the risk of gall bladder problems/stones. One reason we try not to lose weight too fast.

### What is this medication used for?

- Initially developed to lower blood sugar in patients with high blood sugar (diabetes), we're using it for weight loss and improvement in conditions that benefit from reduced body fat.

### What do I need to tell my doctor BEFORE I take this medication?

- If you are **allergic** to this medication. So we can look at alternative options.

### **For all uses of this medication;**

- Tell all of your health care providers that you take this medication. This includes your doctors, nurses, and pharmacists.
- Follow a sensible diet focussed on protein during the weight loss period and incorporate a muscle preserving workout plan.
- If you cannot drink liquids or have side effects so severe you can't keep down sufficient protein, stop the medication and contact your doctor to find out what to do.
- If you are planning on getting pregnant, tell your doctor. It is currently recommended to stop taking this medication at least 2 months before getting pregnant as its effects on the foetus are unknown, but this can be a complex, nuanced area and warrants a detailed personalised discussion.

### **If using for weight loss:**

- If you have high blood sugar (diabetes), you will need to watch your blood sugar closely as they should get better with less weight and you will likely need less of other agents.
- Dramatic weight loss during pregnancy may cause harm to the unborn baby. If you get pregnant while taking this medication or if you want to get pregnant, call your doctor right away.
- Tell your doctor if you are breast-feeding. You will need to talk about any risks to your baby.

### **What are some side effects that I need to call my doctor about right away?**

**WARNING/CAUTION:** Even though it may be rare, some people may have very bad and sometimes deadly side effects when taking any substance - including medications.

See your GP, call the ambulance or visit an emergency department if you have any of the following signs or symptoms that may be related to a severe side effect:

- Signs of an allergic reaction, like rash; hives; itching; red, swollen, blistered, or peeling skin with or without fever; wheezing; tightness in the chest or throat; trouble breathing, swallowing, or talking; unusual hoarseness; or swelling of the mouth, face, lips, tongue, or throat.
- Gallbladder problems are more common with significant weight loss.
  - Signs of gallbladder problems like pain in the upper right belly area, right shoulder area, or between the shoulder blades; change in stool colour (usually pale); very dark urine or yellow skin or eyes; or fever with chills.
- Severe dizziness or passing out. Usually a sign of insufficient fluid intake.
- A fast heartbeat. Usually a sign of insufficient fluid intake or excessively rapid weight loss.
- Change in eyesight (a sign of too rapid improvement in blood sugar levels in diabetics).
- Low blood sugar can sometimes happen though is usually minor unless on other medications for diabetes.
  - Signs may be dizziness, headache, feeling sleepy or weak, shaking, fast heartbeat, confusion, hunger, or sweating. Eat something and if diabetic follow what you have

been told to do for low blood sugar. This may include taking glucose tablets, liquid glucose, or some fruit juices.

- There is a concern that sometimes severe pancreas problems (pancreatitis) could occur with this medication. **Call your doctor right away if you have severe stomach pain, severe back pain, or a severely upset stomach** (do that anyway if you have symptoms like this - even if not on this medication).

### **What are some other side effects of this medication?**

All medications may cause side effects. However, many people have no side effects or only have minor side effects. Call your doctor or get medical help if any of these side effects or any other side effects bother you or do not go away:

- Decreased appetite.
- Constipation, diarrhoea, stomach pain, upset stomach, or throwing up.
- Headache.
- Feeling dizzy, tired, or weak.
- Burping.
- Gas.
- It is not known to cause any psychiatric effects (despite what some people online say - and it was looked for as some other weight loss agents do).

These are not all of the side effects that may occur. If you have questions about side effects, call your doctor or discuss with your pharmacist. Stop taking the medication and call your doctor for medical advice about side effects.

You may report side effects to the national health agency, the Therapeutic Goods Administration, online. (<https://www.tga.gov.au/resources/resource/guidance/reporting-adverse-events>).

### **How is this medication best taken?**

- This pen makes a clicking sound as you prepare the dose.
- It is given as an injection via a tiny little needle into the fatty part of the skin on the top of the thigh, belly area, or upper arm.
- Take with or without food.
- Try to take on the same day each week.
- Move the site where you give the shot with each shot (don't use the exact same spot each week - move around your preferred area, or alternate from side to side).
- Do not use if the solution is cloudy, leaking, or has particles.
- Do not use if solution changes colour.
- Wash your hands before and after use.

- Change needles after each injection (or they get blunt and it hurts more).
- Throw away needles in a needle/sharp disposal box. Do not reuse needles or other items. When the box is full, follow all local rules for getting rid of it. Talk with a doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions.

If using a syringe:

- Attach new needle before each dose.
- Take off the needle after each shot. Do not store this device with the needle on it.
- Put the cap back on after you are done using your dose.
- If you are also using insulin, you may inject this medication and the insulin in the same area of the body but not right next to each other.
- Do not mix this medication in the same syringe with anything else.

### **What do I do if I miss a dose?**

- Take a missed dose as soon as you think about it and continue weekly dosing from the new day.
- Do not take 2 doses within 6 days of each other (this increases the risk of side effects).
- If you miss 2 doses, reduce the dose back to your previous dose or restart at the starting dose to avoid side effects.

### **How do I store and/or throw out this medication?**

Prefilled pens:

- Store unopened and opened pens in a refrigerator. Do not freeze.
- Do not use if it has been frozen.
- Protect from heat and light (by keeping it in the fridge - it will start to degrade over 30°C so does not well in Australian summers)

### **General medication advice:**

- Keep all medications in a safe place. Keep all medications out of the reach of children and pets.
- Throw away unused or expired medications. Do not flush down a toilet or pour down a drain unless you are told to do so. Check with your pharmacist if you have questions about the best way to throw out medications.
- If your symptoms or health problems do not get better or if they become worse, call your doctor.

- Do not share your medications with others and do not take anyone else's medications.