

# WHO Adds Popular Weight-Loss Drugs to Essential Medicines List

## Background

The World Health Organization (WHO) has officially included certain anti-obesity and metabolic disorder medications—most notably semaglutide and tirzepatide—in its Model List of Essential Medicines (EML). This marks a major milestone in the global recognition of obesity as a serious public health condition requiring medical treatment.

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## The Drugs

- **Semaglutide:** A GLP-1 receptor agonist originally developed for type 2 diabetes, now widely prescribed for weight management.
- **Tirzepatide:** A dual GLP-1/GIP receptor agonist, newer but showing even greater efficacy in clinical trials for both diabetes control and obesity management.

Both drugs have demonstrated significant weight reduction in large-scale studies, with additional metabolic benefits such as improved blood sugar and cardiovascular outcomes.

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## Why This Matters

- **Global Health Burden:** Obesity affects over 1 billion people worldwide and is a key risk factor for diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and some cancers.
- **Recognition of Obesity as a Disease:** By adding these medicines to the EML, WHO acknowledges obesity as a medical condition needing treatment—not just lifestyle modification.
- **Access & Affordability:** Inclusion in the EML typically guides national governments in prioritizing drug procurement, insurance coverage, and subsidy policies.

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## Implications for India

- **Rising Obesity in India:** With increasing urbanization, sedentary lifestyles, and dietary changes, India faces a growing obesity crisis, especially among urban middle-class and younger populations.
- **Policy Impact:** The WHO move may push Indian regulators and health authorities (like ICMR and NPPA) to consider price caps, insurance coverage, and inclusion in national programs.
- **Equity Concerns:** Currently, these drugs are expensive and often unaffordable for middle- and low-income patients. Wider access will require negotiations with pharma companies, possible local manufacturing, or generic development.

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## Expert Perspectives

- **Supporters:** See this as a breakthrough that legitimizes medical management of obesity and could reduce long-term healthcare costs by preventing complications.
- **Critics:** Warn that without strong regulation, the drugs may be over-marketed or misused as “cosmetic” weight-loss solutions instead of being targeted to high-risk patients.

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## The Road Ahead

- India may soon need to update its National List of Essential Medicines (NLEM) to align with WHO.
- Pharmaceutical and insurance sectors are expected to respond—potentially making these drugs more accessible.
- Lifestyle interventions will still remain the first-line recommendation, but these drugs offer a powerful new tool in managing obesity and related metabolic diseases.