

Self-Reported Use of GLP-1 Agonists and Mental Health in UK Recreational Athletes

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DESCRIPTION

This study offers a timely and concerning look into the off-label use of Glucagon-Like Peptide-1 (GLP-1) agonists among exercisers and recreational athletes in the UK. With the increasing cultural pressure for lean and muscular bodies, particularly in fitness-focused communities, the emergence of GLP-1 agonists as a body image enhancement tool signals a major shift in how appearance-related medications are being perceived and misused. The findings are both illuminating and cautionary, reflecting not only a significant gap in public understanding of drug safety but also deeper psychological distress among those considering or using these medications without medical supervision.

One of the most striking insights from the study is the level of unawareness about the health risks associated with GLP-1 agonists. Among those familiar with the drugs, more than three-quarters (78.2%) did not know about any potential risks. This is particularly alarming given the well-documented side effects of GLP-1 agonists, including gastrointestinal issues, kidney problems and even suicidal ideation. These findings underscore the urgent need for public health messaging and education, especially on platforms where these drugs are being popularized, such as social media. The misrepresentation of these medications as harmless “Skinny Jabs” distorts their medical purpose and downplays serious risks, pushing vulnerable individuals toward unregulated and unsafe use.

The study also reveals that 25.5% of participants had considered using GLP-1 agonists for aesthetic purposes far exceeding the 2.9% who reported actual usage. While the number of confirmed users may seem low, the intention to use is a strong indicator of potential future uptake. The trend reflects a worrying normalization of pharmacological shortcuts for body modification within exercising populations. It also suggests that as awareness and availability increase especially *via* online sources so too will usage rates, unless effective interventions are implemented.

The mental health profile of those in the high-risk group provides further cause for concern. These individuals scored

significantly higher on measures of anxiety, depression and body image disturbance compared to those in the low-risk group. This pattern supports existing literature linking body dissatisfaction and mental health struggles to performance-enhancing drug use. The association points to a cyclical dynamic: poor body image and psychological distress may drive drug use, which in turn may lead to worsening mental health due to side effects, social stigma, or the guilt of using unapproved substances.

Unregulated use of GLP-1 agonists raises health concerns

It is also noteworthy that GLP-1 agonists were mainly obtained through online vendors and private sellers. This suggests a lack of gatekeeping and regulation, with many users likely bypassing healthcare professionals altogether. The study mentions that half of the users continued their use of the drug even after experiencing adverse effects, indicating either denial of risk, lack of alternative options, or desperation. This behavior illustrates a broader public health risk not just to the individual user, but to healthcare systems burdened by treating complications from improperly sourced and administered medications.

From a methodological standpoint, the study is robust. It uses a representative UK-based sample and reliable measures for assessing body image, anxiety and depression. By leveraging an online platform like Prolific, the researchers were able to collect high-quality data while minimizing some of the sampling biases often associated with fitness or drug-use studies. The decision to collapse the two smaller groups into one “high-risk” group is justifiable, given the small sample of confirmed users and allows for more meaningful statistical analysis.

Risk perception plays key role in deterring GLP-1 agonist use

Another notable strength is the inclusion of participants reasons both for and against GLP-1 agonist use. Most non-users cited fear of side effects as their main deterrent, followed by concerns about the drug’s long-term sustainability

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and unknown effects. This suggests that risk awareness campaigns could be effective if they target the right fears particularly focusing on the potential for irreversible damage, addiction, or counterfeit products.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the study highlights a critical and growing issue: the misuse of medically approved drugs for non-medical, aesthetic

purposes among people who may appear healthy and fit. As the fitness industry becomes increasingly intertwined with social media and commercialized quick-fix solutions, it is likely that GLP-1 agonist misuse will continue to rise. Preventive action is necessary not only from regulatory bodies like the MHRA but also from gym owners, trainers, social media influencers and mental health professionals. Education on the real risks, access to psychological support and societal shifts in body image ideals will be key to curbing this emerging trend.