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Boehringer Ingelheim

Boehringer Ingelheim enters obesity drug race

German group aims to join companies whose fortunes have been transformed by weight loss treatments



Worldwide obesity rates have tripled since 1975, according to the World Health Organization © Toby Melville/Reuters

Hannah Kuchler in London JUNE 24 2023

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Boehringer Ingelheim is entering the race for the next generation of obesity drugs, after a trial showed its treatment helped participants on the highest dose lose 19 per cent of their body weight.

The German drugmaker is now preparing to launch a late-stage trial of its drug, which if approved, would compete with Eli Lilly's Mounjaro and [Novo Nordisk's Wegovy](#). US pharma group Pfizer and biotech Regeneron are among the others hoping to enter the market.

While results are not directly comparable, trial participants on Mounjaro lost an average of 22.5 per cent of their body weight in results published last year, while patients in a Wegovy study lost about 15 per cent.

Boehringer Ingelheim believes its drug could result in even greater weight loss than in its phase 2 study if taken for longer, as participants did not stop losing weight in its 48-week trial.

Paola Casarosa, head of therapeutic areas at Boehringer Ingelheim, said it was confident it would see “an even stronger effect” in the larger and longer phase 3 trial that it is discussing with regulators.

“What we found absolutely very encouraging was there was no sign of plateauing of the effects,” she added.

Appetite for the first two obesity drugs have [transformed the fortunes](#) of the pharmaceutical companies that developed them. Shares in Danish pharma group Novo Nordisk have soared 247 per cent in the past five years, while Indianapolis-based Eli Lilly has become the world’s largest pharmaceutical company by market capitalisation on hopes for its drugs for obesity and Alzheimer’s.

Companies have struggled to keep up with a surge in demand accelerated by celebrities using the treatments, and similar drugs designed for diabetics, for weight loss. Worldwide obesity rates have tripled since 1975, according to the [World Health Organization](#), and a study from Harvard forecast almost half of Americans are expected to be obese by 2030.

Survodutide, which Boehringer Ingelheim developed with Danish biotech Zealand Pharma, copies a hormone called GLP-1 to reduce appetite in the same way as the existing drugs. But survodutide also mimics another well-known hormone, glucagon, which speeds up the rate at which a patient burns energy.

“Anecdotally, we know that the less food we ingest, the more our metabolism adjusts,” Casarosa said. “The balance is very important for meaningful and impactful weight loss.”

The drug can also tackle fat accumulation on the liver, which 70 per cent of obese patients suffer from, and can cause diabetes or cardiovascular conditions.

But about a quarter of participants dropped out of the trial because of side-effects, which were mainly gastrointestinal, similar to the nausea experienced by many on the approved obesity drugs. Boehringer Ingelheim said this could be avoided if the dose was increased more slowly in future.

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