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Health

Fat-Fighting Drugs Of The Future

Allison Van Dusen, 07.09.07, 12:00 PM ET

Wouldn't it be nice to pop a pill and watch your extra pounds melt away?

It's a fantasy pharmaceutical companies and researchers have been trying to make a reality for years. Not only would it be a huge seller for anyone wanting to get a handle on their gut, but it also could have a dramatic impact on the health of millions of overweight and obese people.

While GlaxoSmithKline's [alli](#) made news recently as the first FDA-approved over-the-counter weight-loss drug, a glimpse of what's currently in development shows it could have a lot more competition in the coming years.

In Pictures: Fat-Fighting Drugs Of The Future

"Consumers looking for the magic pill--over the last 40 to 50 years it has just not panned out," says Dr. Christian Weyer, executive director of clinical research for Amylin Pharmaceuticals. "In obesity there's a huge need for more efficacious drugs."

That's because losing weight is no piece of cake.

Tipping The Scales

Carol Davies, a partner at the consulting firm Fletcher Knight and expert on consumer weight management, says people tend to fall into one of two groups. There are those who are fairly successful at controlling their weight through traditional diet and exercise. But the majority of people fall into the other group, struggling to maintain a healthy lifestyle and lose weight.

"Who's got time to sit down and plan meals for a week?" Davies says. "They're looking for help and a quick fix."

But while there's a handful of weight-loss drugs on the market, including Xenical and [Meridia](#), consumers can't just take them and expect dramatic results without also putting in a little effort. It's recommended that people taking these drugs follow a reduced-calorie diet to produce the best results and, in the case of alli and Xenical, which both contain Orlistat, to limit side effects, such as an urgent need to go the bathroom.

A Look Ahead

Alli is not the only weight-loss drug making headlines lately, however.

A Georgetown University Medical Center study, published online this month in *Nature Medicine*, has uncovered a link between stress and weight gain in mice. By administering a [Y2R blocker](#) into their abdominal fat, researchers say they have figured out how to manipulate the connection and prevent weight gain and metabolic syndrome in mice under stress. Scientists are hopeful that the method might work the same way in humans.

And researchers at Imperial College, London, are working on a treatment for obesity that's based on natural appetite suppression, mimicking the body's response to being full. Steve Bloom, a professor in the Division of Investigative Science at Imperial College, is developing a synthetic form of [pancreatic polypeptide](#), a gut hormone that's released when people ingest food that acts as a neurotransmitter, telling the brain to stop eating.

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The hormone would likely be given as a subcutaneous injection, though further down the road it could be delivered via gum or a patch.

"There is a desperate need for some kind of treatment," Bloom says, estimating the drug is three to five years from market for prescription use. "We would really like to get this out there for people."

Other obesity drugs in the pipeline include Amylin's [Pramlintide](#), which is already marketed in the U.S. to treat diabetes and control blood sugar, and Compellis Pharmaceuticals' CP404, a calcium channel blocker used in the form of a nasal spray to block smell and reduce food intake. But both are also years from reaching consumers' hands.

An Ounce of Prevention

While the wait for a magic weight-loss pill continues, your best bet is to follow the tried and true advice that doctors, nutritionists and other health experts have been spouting for years.

That means filling your diet with fruits, vegetables, lean meats and protein and getting off the couch and into the gym, says Leah Whigham, a researcher at the School of Medicine and Public Health at the University of Wisconsin at Madison who has studied health effects related to body composition and obesity.

It may not be easy, but at least you won't need a prescription, and the side effects tend to be positive.

"It's always worth having a healthy lifestyle," Whigham says.

[In Pictures: Fat-Fighting Drugs Of The Future](#)