

# The Oregonian

## **Meds help with ailments but also may add pounds**

**Side effects - Some of the many prescription drugs that can affect weight include those that treat high blood pressure and depression**

Wednesday, May 30, 2007

**PATRICK O'NEILL**  
The Oregonian

If you're struggling to lose weight, your medicine cabinet could be its own mine field:

Dozens of prescription drugs, researchers and practitioners find, can cause you to gain unwanted pounds. And unless your doctor warns you of that side-effect, you could find yourself backsliding on your weight-loss program without having a clue as to why.

For non-dieters, unexpected extra pounds may present a new challenge to surmount.

The implicated prescription drugs span a wide spectrum of pharmaceuticals -- from seizure medications to antidepressants to blood pressure meds.

Typically, the patient's immediate medical needs steal all the attention, masking the weight gain triggered by medicine. That's how it was for Joanna Burton, a 40-year-old single mom who's fought her weight all her life.

Three years ago, she hit 305 pounds, aggravating high blood pressure and a prediabetic condition. She underwent a stomach-shrinking surgery, and the pounds melted away. Her weight bottomed out at 155 after six months, and her life was changed.

Burton, director of social services in a Portland long-term care facility, was thrilled.

But in the fall of 2005, she was physically assaulted, an event that plunged her into a post-traumatic stress disorder with nightmares and depression. Doctors prescribed Zyprexa, a drug normally used to treat psychosis but which is used as a mood stabilizer in patients with post-traumatic stress disorder.

She took Zyprexa for eight weeks without gaining weight. But she said the drug altered her metabolism and set the stage for rapid weight gain in the months ahead, when she was then prescribed antidepressants.

More modern antidepressants didn't work for her, however, so her doctor put her on nortriptyline, an older medication that made her crave carbohydrates and sweets and made her thirsty.

"It caught me by surprise," she said. She developed a particular fondness for flavored coffees and fruit juices.

Result: She put on 30 pounds in less than two months.

"My jeans got tighter, my other clothes got tighter," she said. The antidepressant also made her sluggish and tired, unable to exercise.

Now, at 180, she's off the weight-inducing antidepressant and exercising regularly, walking and taking part in a water aerobics class.

Despite the weight gain, however, she said she'd take the drugs again: "They were life-savers."

Not everyone puts on pounds because of drugs. Weight gain can vary widely from patient to patient. One study shows that Zyprexa, for instance, causes a 10-pound weight gain in 75 percent of patients who take it. **Cause for worry**

Prescription drugs are only a small contributor to the nation's obesity epidemic, with other factors such as lack of exercise and poor eating habits taking the lead.

But Dr. Keith Bachman, a gastroenterologist with Kaiser Permanente, says even a little drug-induced weight gain is cause for worry.

He recently gave a presentation, "The Monster in the Medicine Cabinet: Weight Gain and Medication," during a weight management conference in Portland.

"There is some concern coming from the increased problems of obesity over the last 20 years," he said in an interview. "This has coincided with the increased use of medications, along with our eating patterns, we're less active, and other things."

Another patient, Becki Welch, 51, gained 100 pounds in six months on an extended course of the steroid prednisone, prescribed for intestinal inflammation about five years ago.

Normally, the medication would have been given over a matter of weeks. But every time her physician tapered off the dose, her inflammation flared up again. Her weight climbed to 398 pounds.

One problem with prednisone, she said, is that it "makes food taste so good."

She made fudge and ate 2 1/2 pounds in one week, she said.

She fought her way down to 282 pounds, she said, by following a diet designed for diabetics. **Poorly understood**

Just why some drugs make it easy to gain weight is poorly understood.

A survey of studies on weight-inducing drugs by the Pharmacist's Letter earlier this year showed that a wide variety of frequently prescribed drugs can promote weight gain.

The newsletter cited studies showing that drugs with some forms of histamine, serotonin, and dopamine tend to stimulate appetite. Some drugs are known to cause sluggishness, which leads to a decrease in physical activity.

Bachman says that while prescription medications can be blamed for only a fraction of the nation's obesity epidemic, it helps if doctors counsel their patients who take them.

When doctors prescribe medications, he said, "they should ask is this person at risk for weight gain or diabetes?"

"This is one place where physicians can be thoughtful," he said. "They should consider getting patients on a scale at the same time they prescribe some of these medications."

Patrick O'Neill; 503-221-8233; poneill@news.oregonian.com

