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GLP-1 Generics and India's Obesity Crisis: A Metabolic Revolution

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Highlights

• India's obesity pattern is predominantly metabolic, with many individuals showing insulin resistance and visceral fat accumulation even at normal BMI ("thin–fat" phenotype).
• GLP-1 receptor agonists such as semaglutide act by enhancing satiety, slowing gastric emptying, reducing appetite, and improving insulin sensitivity.
• Introduction of generic semaglutide in India has significantly reduced treatment cost, improving accessibility for obesity and type 2 diabetes management.
• GLP-1 therapy is effective for weight reduction but may reduce lean muscle mass if not combined with high-protein diet and resistance exercise.
• Long-term success requires integration of medication with lifestyle modification including diet quality improvement, physical activity, sleep regulation, and behavioral change.

Introduction

India is witnessing a rapid rise in obesity, type 2 diabetes, and metabolic disorders, making it one of the world's largest hubs for metabolic disease. However, obesity in India differs from Western patterns. Many Indians develop insulin resistance, abdominal obesity, and metabolic complications even at a normal body mass index (BMI), a condition often described as the "thin–fat Indian phenotype." This unique metabolic vulnerability has shifted scientific focus from simple weight gain to deeper metabolic dysfunction involving visceral fat accumulation, low muscle mass, chronic inflammation, and impaired insulin action (Escobar-Morreale, 2020; Di Lorenzo *et al*., 2023). In recent years, glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) receptor agonists such as semaglutide and tirzepatide have emerged as breakthrough therapies for obesity and diabetes management. With the arrival of lower-cost generic semaglutide in India, these drugs are now becoming more accessible, generating widespread public interest and raising hopes for better obesity treatment (Sundaram *et al*., 2024)..

India's Obesity Problem is More Than Weight Gain

India's obesity burden cannot be understood through BMI alone. Research increasingly shows that many Indians who appear lean externally may still have high visceral fat, insulin resistance, fatty liver disease, and elevated cardiometabolic risk. This phenomenon is particularly common among South Asians due to genetic predisposition, sedentary lifestyles, refined carbohydrate-rich diets, poor protein intake, stress, and sleep disturbances (Zeng *et al*., 2020). According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), nearly one-fourth of Indian adults are overweight or obese, while metabolic diseases continue to rise across urban populations. At the same time, India continues to struggle with undernutrition, creating a "double burden" of malnutrition and obesity. This paradox reflects the transition toward processed foods, reduced physical activity, and metabolic imbalance rather than simple overeating alone.

Understanding GLP-1: The Science Behind the Drug

Glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) is a natural hormone released from intestinal L-cells after food intake. It plays a major role in appetite regulation, glucose metabolism, and digestion. GLP-1 slows gastric emptying, enhances insulin secretion, improves satiety, and reduces food intake. Because of these actions, scientists developed GLP-1 receptor agonists as therapeutic agents for type 2 diabetes and obesity management. Drugs such as semaglutide mimic the action of this natural hormone. They help people feel full earlier, reduce cravings, lower calorie intake, and improve blood glucose control. Clinical studies have demonstrated substantial weight reduction and improvement in insulin sensitivity among individuals using GLP-1 therapies. The popularity of GLP-1 therapies is largely due to their ability to target appetite regulation and metabolic dysfunction simultaneously. Unlike conventional dieting approaches that rely solely on willpower, GLP-1 drugs biologically influence hunger signals and eating behaviour (Saeed *et al*., 2025).

These medications work through several mechanisms such as:

- Increasing satiety and reducing hunger
- Slowing stomach emptying
- Improving insulin sensitivity
- Reducing excessive food cravings or "food noise"
- Supporting sustained calorie reduction

Many patients experience significant improvements in body weight, glycemic control, and cardiometabolic health markers. This has made GLP-1 drugs attractive not only for diabetes treatment but also for chronic obesity management.

The Rise of Generic Semaglutide in India

Until recently, GLP-1 medications were financially inaccessible for most Indians because imported branded products such as Wegovy (Rs. 10,850/-) and Ozempic (Rs. 8800/-) were expensive. However, the expiry of semaglutide patents has allowed Indian pharmaceutical companies to launch generic alternatives at lower prices (Rs 1290/- per month). Several domestic manufacturers have introduced semaglutide-based products for diabetes and weight management, leading to increased affordability and wider market penetration. As prices decline, more middle-income patients are now considering medical obesity treatment for the first time. The arrival of generics may significantly expand obesity care access in India, especially for individuals with insulin resistance, type 2 diabetes, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), fatty liver disease, and central obesity. This transition represents an important shift in how obesity is viewed not merely as a cosmetic issue, but as a chronic metabolic disease requiring long-term management (Di Lorenzo *et al*., 2023).

"Thin–Fat Indian" Problem

Despite their promise, GLP-1 drugs are not a complete solution to India's metabolic health crisis. The "thin–fat" phenotype involves more than excess calorie intake alone. Low muscle mass, poor dietary quality, sedentary behaviour, chronic stress, and genetic predisposition all contribute to metabolic dysfunction (Avery *et al*., 2022). One major concern is that rapid weight loss with GLP-1 therapy may also reduce lean muscle mass if adequate protein intake and resistance training are not maintained. This is particularly important in India, where protein deficiency and sarcopenia are already common. Additionally, many Indian diets remain heavily dependent on refined carbohydrates such as polished rice, maida-based foods, sweets, and sugary beverages. Appetite suppression alone cannot correct long-term nutritional imbalance without improving diet quality (Forslund *et al*., 2020).. Therefore, experts increasingly emphasize that GLP-1 therapies should be combined with:

- High-protein balanced diets
- Strength training and physical activity
- Sleep regulation
- Stress management
- Behavioural modification strategies

Without these lifestyle interventions, weight regain may occur once the medication is discontinued.

Safety Concerns and Misuse

Although GLP-1 therapies are effective, they are not free from risks. Common side effects include nausea, vomiting, constipation, abdominal discomfort, and gastrointestinal disturbances, especially during dose escalation. Other concerns include potential lean muscle loss during rapid weight reduction, risk of hypoglycemia in diabetic patients, retinal complications during rapid glucose correction and unsupervised cosmetic or recreational use. As generic availability expands, experts are increasingly worried about misuse through beauty clinics, gyms, online promotions, and non-medical channels. Obesity treatment requires careful medical assessment, dose titration, and long-term monitoring rather than casual self-medication (Teede *et al*., 2023)..

Conclusion

The emergence of generic GLP-1 therapies represents a major advancement in obesity and diabetes management in India. These medications may help millions of individuals struggling with metabolic dysfunction, insulin resistance, and obesity-related complications. However, they should not be viewed as standalone cures. India's obesity epidemic is deeply linked to changing lifestyles, poor diet quality, low physical activity, chronic stress, inadequate sleep, and metabolic susceptibility unique to South Asians. Sustainable improvement will require an integrated approach combining pharmacological support with nutritional therapy, exercise, and behavioural change. GLP-1 drugs may help reduce appetite and body weight, but long-term metabolic health will still depend on rebuilding healthier food systems, improving muscle health, and encouraging sustainable lifestyle practices across the population.

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