OVERCOMING OBESITY

The Patient & the Industry's Parallel Quest for the Perfect Weight Loss Product

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Introduction

The topic of obesity is not new, but finding a weight loss pill with little or no side effects is something the world of pharmacy is still trying to conquer. Why is it so difficult for drug manufacturers to come up with a safe and effective weight loss medication? Could it be that weight loss supplements need to be tailored to an individual's body type, factoring in age, gender or hormonal issues? There is so much information out there on weight loss, making it hard for pharmacists, pharmacy technicians and patients to know which weight loss efforts are safe and effective. Many reports on the advancements of weight loss protocol are contradictory, making the treatment difficult. As pharmacists and pharmacy technicians, it is important to be able to provide valuable, accurate information to patients hoping to overcome obesity. Obesity can be a touchy subject and is often a hard problem to solve. Many suffer with managing their weight for months, if not years. According to WebMD online reports, nearly two-thirds of American adults are overweight or obese. With these statistics in mind, drug researchers and manufacturers are working constantly to create the next great weight loss medication, but the FDA continues to reject medications submitted for approval due to the presence of too many adverse side effects or because the drug's benefits fail to outweigh its risks. Why is it so difficult for manufacturers to come up with a safe and effective weight loss pill?

Patients suffering from obesity often do not know where to turn for help either because they do not have enough knowledge or because they are feeling overwhelmed from too much information. Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians can aid patients seeking to lose weight by posting literature in their pharmacy that offers solid information about weight loss medications, weight loss supplements and the benefits and risks of using them both. Diet medications should be prescribed as a last resort when eating a balanced diet, cutting back on unhealthy foods and exercising alone do not work. Doctors must also consider genetic factors and a patient's metabolism when examining why a patient is obese.

What is Obesity?

First, let us examine what obesity is exactly. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) define obesity by a patient's body mass index (BMI), which is calculated by a person's height and weight. A BMI between 18.5 and 24.9 is considered healthy by the CDC. If a person's BMI is between 25 to 29.9, that person is considered overweight. If the BMI is 30 or higher, the person is considered obese. To use an example, if an adult is 62 inches tall (about 5'2") and weighs 142 pounds, that person would have a BMI of 26. The adult would be considered overweight by the CDC. However, if that same adult weighed 169 pounds, she would have a BMI of 31. She would then be considered obese. The CDC suggests that people who are obese require higher cost medical care. Being overweight can increase patient's chances of contracting heart disease, stroke, diabetes, difficulty breathing during sleep, certain types of cancers and osteoarthritis. This in turn places a rather large financial burden on the U.S. health care system. There are some contributing factors that may lead a person to become obese. Sometimes it is a lack of activity or willingness to exercise. Genetic factors and metabolism, such as thyroid disorders, also contribute to obesity.

Weight Loss Medications

After modifying eating habits and increasing exercise, obese patients may still have trouble losing weight. When these two methods fail, doctors may then turn to weight loss drugs. The only obesity drug on the market that has been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is orlistat. Orlistat is available in prescription form and over the counter (OTC). Orlistat first became available by prescription as Xenical by Roche Pharmaceuticals in 1998. It was made over-the-counter in 2007 as Alli, marketed by GlaxoSmithKline. Orlistat treats obesity by blocking the absorption of fats from a person's diet and, by this process, reducing caloric intake. Patients also follow a reduced-calorie diet with their medication regimen.

Those taking weight loss drugs need to carefully examine the side effects against the potential success of losing weight. In May of 2010, GlaxoSmithKline announced that it had updated its product label on Alli and informed patients of rare instances of severe liver damage from taking the drug. The label update followed the FDA's safety review of orlistat, which is currently being implemented with Roche, the makers of Xenical. Other side effects of orlistat include gas, frequent or uncontrollable bowel movements, diarrhea and oily stools.

Familydoctor.org lists other possible side effects of weight loss medications as nervousness, irritability, headaches, dry mouth, nausea, constipation, abdominal pain, diarrhea and sleep prob-