

EMMA: Prescriptions for Ozempic and similar drugs have exploded in recent years.

You've probably heard of them as powerful medications for Type 2 diabetes and weight loss.

That's exactly why Paul Grayson started taking Ozempic more than a year and a half ago.

He wanted to shed extra pounds to help with health issues like high blood pressure.

PAUL GRAYSON: It's been a wonder drug for me really 'cause, you know, I'm currently at 182.

I think I was around 225 before.

And I've stayed at that.

EMMA: Grayson says Ozempic hasn't just lowered his desire for food.

GRAYSON: My appetite was affected for everything right away, including alcohol.

EMMA: Now, Grayson does not have an alcohol use disorder.

But his experience is one example why researchers are exploring how medications like Ozempic and Mounjaro affect addictive behaviors.

The latest study comes from Loyola University Chicago.

Researchers there found that people with alcohol use disorder had a 50% lower rate of binge drinking if they had a prescription for Ozempic or similar medications compared to those who were not on the drugs.

And people with opioid addiction had a 40% lower rate of overdose if they were on one of these medications.

Dr. Lorenzo Leggio is clinical director of the National Institute of Drug Abuse.

LORENZO LEGGIO: Definitely, it's a very strong association, so I think I will say I was happily delighted to see such a strong association.

EMMA: The new research looked at the health records of more than 1.3 million people with alcohol and substance use disorders over an eight-year period.

Leggio was not involved in the study, but he says the findings are in line with lots of evidence from animal studies that suggest these drugs can reduce addictive cravings.

LEGGIO: So I think the neuroscience rationale is very strong.

EMMA: The active ingredients in these medications work by mimicking hormones in the body that help regulate blood sugar and make you feel satisfied after eating.

Leggio says they also seem to impact mechanisms in the brain that create pleasure from both food and addictive substances.

LEGGIO: They work on what we call the reward system, so meaning those mechanisms in the brain that are related to the pleasure and to the addictive properties of drugs like alcohol, opioid, tobacco, etc.

EMMA: Making them less rewarding - but as promising as the research is, Leggio notes that most of the human evidence so far, including the new study, is based on patient records, so it can't prove cause and effect.

He says we still need more research from randomized controlled clinical trials before medications like Ozempic are used to treat addiction.

There are several such trials underway.