

# How People Interpret Ads Relating to Prescription-only Weight-loss Medicines

Summary report

April 2026



# Contents

1. Executive summary .....	3
2. Background and regulatory context .....	4
3. Why this research, and why now? .....	4
4. Scope and methodology .....	5
4.1 Project scope .....	5
4.2 Quantitative phase.....	5
4.3 Qualitative phase .....	6
5. Headline findings.....	6
5.1 Weight-loss injections are entering the mainstream.....	6
5.2 Many people interpreted the ads as promoting weight-loss injections.....	6
5.3 Certain cues make consumers more likely to interpret ads as being for injections.....	7
5.4 Ads are typically seen as promoting a purchase as opposed to an eligibility check.....	8
5.5 Ads are felt to put pressure on people and can be problematic, particularly towards vulnerable groups .....	8
5.6 Knowledge about POMs and their advertising restrictions is limited .....	9
6. What this means in practice: implications and next steps .....	9
Contact us .....	10

# 1. Executive summary

**The volume of advertising related to weight-loss treatments has increased significantly in parallel with heightened public interest in, and media coverage of, prescription-only medicines (POMs). In particular, GLP-1 weight-loss injections, which are only available with a prescription, are increasingly used in the UK.<sup>1</sup> An estimated 1.6 million adults in England, Wales and Scotland used these medicines between early 2024 and early 2025.<sup>2</sup> With limited availability via the NHS, many people are turning to private online providers to access weight-loss injections.<sup>3</sup> However, these medicines are costly when purchased via private prescriptions and may require long-term use.**

Over the past 18 months, the promotion of weight-loss injections has been a significant regulatory priority for the ASA, because the CAP Code prohibits the promotion of POMs to the public. Using our AI-powered Active Ad Monitoring system, the ASA has identified emerging trends in advertising for weight-loss services which offer prescription-only medicines. This led to published rulings and updated guidance to clarify how the Code rules apply in this area.

The ASA has seen advertisers adopt new marketing approaches in this growing sector. To strengthen the evidence base for its regulatory approach in this rapidly evolving area, the ASA commissioned [consumer research](#). The research explored how people interpret advertising for weight-loss services that prescribe POMs, and whether they see these ads as promoting those medicines.

The findings suggest that people interpret ads as being for weight-loss injections based on a mix of signals, such as claims, imagery, advertising style and branding. These signals can result in people thinking an ad refers to weight-loss injections even when the product is not named. In some cases, one strong signal is enough for people to assume the ad is promoting a weight-loss injection.

The findings also indicate that many people are unaware that these medicines require – just over half of respondents correctly recognised that weight-loss injections require a prescription, either through an in-person or online consultation.

People are more likely to see these ads as encouraging them to buy a product or service, rather than to consult a healthcare professional about whether the treatment is suitable for them. This has important implications for advertisers seeking to promote weight-loss services without breaching the prohibition on advertising POMs.

The ASA will use these findings to inform its regulatory approach, support future enforcement activity, and provide clearer guidance to advertisers about how to promote weight-loss services responsibly without indirectly advertising POMs.

---

<sup>1</sup> GLP-1 weight-loss injections are prescription-only medicines that help people lose weight by mimicking the action of the natural hormone GLP-1 (glucagon-like peptide-1) in the body.

<sup>2</sup> [1.6 million UK adults used weight-loss drugs in past year | UCL News - UCL – University College London](#)

<sup>3</sup> [New data reveal inequalities in access to private GLP-1 weight-loss drugs as demand surges](#)

## 2. Background and regulatory context

### ASA and CAP actions

This research is part of a wider ASA programme to reduce harm, improve compliance and clarify the rules in this sector. As part of this work, the ASA is in ongoing dialogue with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and has engaged with the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) on issues such as remote prescribing. The ASA is also aware of wider government interest in the regulation of medicines advertising.

The ASA has published 18 rulings since 2025 on advertising for services providing these medicines.<sup>4</sup> CAP has carried out sustained compliance and enforcement action, including a jointly published Enforcement Notice with the MHRA and GPhC in September 2025; updated guidance to clarify how the rules apply and direct engagement with advertisers in the sector.

### Restrictions on advertising prescription-only medicines

Regulation 284(1) of the Human Medicines Regulations 2012 prohibits the publishing of an “advertisement that is likely to lead to the use of a prescription-only medicine”. This provides the legal framework for CAP Code Rule 12.12, which prohibits the advertisement of a POM to the public.<sup>5</sup>

The MHRA Blue Guide further clarifies that it is unlawful to publish advertisements that encourage members of the public to use or request a specific POM.<sup>6</sup> This prohibition applies across media within the ASA’s remit, including paid search, paid and organic social media, influencer marketing and affiliate advertising.

CAP guidance on *Healthcare: Prescription-only medicine* advises advertisers to “promote the ‘consultation’ itself, rather than the product”, reflecting that advertising which implies or signals access to a POM is likely to fall within the prohibition.<sup>7</sup>

## 3. Why this research, and why now?

The number of people using weight-loss injections has grown rapidly in the UK.<sup>8</sup> In response to the linked increase in advertising for weight-loss treatments, the ASA has acted to ensure advertising in this sector complies with the CAP Code.

Advertisers have continued to develop new marketing approaches, particularly over the last 18 months. Innovation in a rapidly evolving market is to be expected and drives competition, promoting consumer choice and stimulating growth. However, some of the approaches used raise questions about how people interpret such advertising in practice, and whether it is at risk of being perceived as promoting a POM. These include indirect references to injections, using alternative or informal terms to refer to the medicines, imagery of injector pens, pricing claims and testimonials.

---

<sup>4</sup> As of 2 April 2026

<sup>5</sup> The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is the UK’s independent regulator of advertising. It applies the UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing and the UK Code of Broadcast Advertising (the UK Advertising Codes) written by the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP). The ASA ensures ads across all media are legal, decent, honest and truthful, and takes action when advertising is misleading, harmful, offensive or otherwise irresponsible. [CAP Code: 12 Medicines, medical devices, health-related products and beauty products](#)

<sup>6</sup> [MHRA: The Blue Guide - Advertising and Promotion of Medicines in the UK](#)

<sup>7</sup> [CAP: Advice Online - Healthcare: Prescription-only medicine](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Nesta - Silver bullet or sticking plaster? Weight-loss drugs and the UK's obesity crisis.](#)

To better understand this, the ASA commissioned consumer research. The research is designed to help strengthen the evidence base used to inform the ASA's decision-making process. It will also support advertisers by sharing insights to help ensure their advertising complies with the rules. It explores how consumers interpret different advertising approaches, what messages they take from them, and whether they believe the ads promote prescription-only weight-loss medicines. The findings will also contribute to possible updates to CAP guidance, following new ASA rulings and ongoing engagement with government, other regulators and industry stakeholders.

## 4. Scope and methodology

The primary objective of the study was to assess how consumers interpret a range of recent ads relating to weight-loss treatments and whether they perceive them as promoting weight-loss injections.

The research examined:

- the public's immediate perceptions of selected ads
- their understanding of the overall message in the ads
- whether they believed the ads were promoting POMs

A secondary objective was to explore awareness of weight-loss treatments and consumers' understanding that some medicines are prescription-only and subject to advertising restrictions.

### 4.1 Project scope

The research was split into two phases, an initial quantitative phase, followed by a two-stage qualitative phase. Both phases were completed in December 2025.

Testing a wide range of ad stimulus was key to understanding consumer perceptions and interpretations. A total of 35 ads were tested over the course of the study, including ads:

- from a range of channels – TV, paid-for social media, paid-for search ads and influencer ads
- using different creative techniques – videos, stills and text-only ads
- targeted at different audiences
- using a range of signals – including pen imagery, references to significant weight-loss, references to price rises and testimonials

In addition, six landing pages linking through from the initial online ad were tested (qualitative phase only).

### 4.2 Quantitative phase

The quantitative phase consisted of a UK-wide online survey with 2,000 respondents aged 18-64 years. The survey was designed to provide context for the study by exploring consumer understanding, usage and interest in different weight-loss treatments, including POMs, as well as consumer understanding of terminology and regulation.

Participants also completed a stimulus exercise, in which they were shown a weight-loss ad, and asked a range of questions, including spontaneous and prompted responses about their perception of the product or service the ad was promoting; to identify cues within the ad that signalled the product or service they thought was being promoted; and for their perception of the ad's purpose.

### 4.3 Qualitative phase

Thirty participants aged 18-67, from across the UK, took part in a five-day online community in which they were shown a wide selection of ads and asked to provide detailed feedback on their interpretation of the ads.

This was followed by 45-minute, in-depth interviews with 10 participants, allowing for deeper exploration of how individuals interpreted the ads, and their understanding of POMs, specifically those used for weight-loss.

Together, these methods were intended to provide a robust and realistic assessment of the public's interpretation of ads for weight-loss treatments, grounded in how people actually encounter digital and other ads for weight-loss.

## 5. Headline findings

### 5.1 Weight-loss injections are entering the mainstream

**Weight-loss injections are entering the public consciousness, with 71% of the UK population having functional or high knowledge of these products.**

Consumers use and understand both everyday, colloquial language, as well as medical terms to describe them.

Six percent of the UK population have used them before and a further 18% would consider using them in the future.<sup>9</sup> Both those who have used, and would consider using, the injections tend to have a greater knowledge of the products and are more likely to interpret ads as relating to weight-loss injections. This shows that as knowledge of weight-loss injections grows, so does the likelihood of interpreting ads as promoting them.

Women are more likely to use, or consider using, weight-loss injections. This is particularly the case for 45-64-year-olds and those who are unhappy with the way their body looks.

### 5.2 Many people interpreted the ads as promoting weight-loss injections

Across the 12 examples of weight-loss treatment ads tested quantitatively, on average, 10% of the UK population spontaneously thought ads were promoting weight-loss injections, rising to 29%

---

<sup>9</sup> This broadly aligns with other recently published research from YouGov which reported that approximately 8% of Britons say they have used weight-loss drugs, and 14% would consider using them in the future: <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54254-weight-loss-drugs-in-britain-how-theyre-changing-grocery-spending-takeaway-consumption-and-food-choices>

when prompted with a list of potential products or services that may be being advertised. On an ad-by-ad basis, between 9% and 69% thought the ad they saw was promoting weight-loss injections.

Those with greater knowledge of weight-loss injections (including those who would consider using, have used, or are currently using them) are more likely to interpret the ads as promoting them. Having a wider pool of reference points to draw on, they are better placed to pick up on potential signals of injections.

### 5.3 Certain cues make people more likely to interpret ads as being for injections

**Consumers often infer what an ad is promoting based on multiple signals working together. Their inferences depend on which signals are used, their perceived strength, and the knowledge a consumer has to draw on.**

For example, an ad that included injector pen imagery, references to rapid weight-loss and pricing information was more likely to be interpreted as referring to injections than one containing only general weight-management language.

Signals identified as increasing the likelihood of interpretation as injections include:

- **Imagery:** injector pens and injection-related visuals, were among the strongest signals that led consumers to interpret an ad as relating to weight-loss injections, even without additional signals. Many also interpreted images of advertiser branded boxes to represent a physical product, such as pills or injections. Some current or prospective users recognise certain boxes as being likely to be for a weight-loss injection.
- **Language:** the clearest signal was the inclusion of a POM brand name, such as Mounjaro or Wegovy. Alongside this, terms such as “injection” and “jab” and references to BMI (body mass index) eligibility, led consumers to interpret that an ad was for a weight-loss injection. This was particularly the case alongside other signals for weight-loss within ads.
- **Product information:** explanations of how the product works; specific prices; price changes; or specialist terminology can lead some consumers to infer that an ad relates to weight-loss injections, particularly if they are already aware of typical monthly costs.
- **Effectiveness claims:** references to significant or rapid weight-loss or rapid weight-loss, that many feel is unlikely through diet and exercise alone, can suggest that injections are most likely to achieve such results.
- **Tone and approach:** people identified both clinical and holistic advertising styles as potentially promoting services which provide injections. For some, explicit, medical-styled approaches were likely to be interpreted as offering injections. But for others, holistic approaches were also interpreted as potentially offering injections, alongside support with diet and exercise. Similarly, the research found a divide in consumer attitudes towards weight-loss injections more generally - with some seeing them as a medical treatment and others seeing them as a lifestyle product.
- **Provider/marketer:** people considered the perceived authority of the provider and their brand as a relevant signal in determining what the ad was for.

## **5.4 Ads are typically seen as promoting a purchase as opposed to an eligibility check**

On average, 44% of the UK population think the tested weight-loss treatment ad is trying to encourage them to purchase the product or service being promoted. References to price, customers, transactional language and perceived 'pressure' selling fuel this.

In comparison, 22% feel the ad is encouraging them to talk to a healthcare professional about eligibility or suitability of the service.

Seven in 10 (70%) perceive the weight-loss treatment advertised as likely to be widely available, including among those who think the ad is specifically promoting weight-loss injections.

## **5.5 Ads are felt to put pressure on people and can be problematic, particularly for vulnerable groups**

The majority of people in the UK feel weight-loss treatment ads put pressure on people to lose weight and are often targeted at vulnerable audiences.

Across the ads tested, women were most often identified as the likely target audience. Participants frequently pointed to cues such as women being featured in the ad, testimonials from women, brand names referencing women or motherhood, and visual design choices such as pastel colour palettes.

Some ads that featured "real" or relatable women received positive reactions from participants who identified with the situations shown. For example, testimonial-style ads featuring busy parents or women managing everyday life were seen as relatable and, in some cases, motivating.

However, ads perceived to target specific life stages for women often drew more mixed or critical reactions. In particular, ads aimed at postpartum mothers were viewed as inappropriate and placing pressure on women to "bounce back" following childbirth. Similar, though generally less strong, concerns were raised about ads that appeared to target menopausal women.

Some specific types of wording or framing were also viewed negatively by participants. Ads highlighting 'discreet' access or packaging, for example, emphasising the absence of face-to-face interaction or delivery in a subtle box were sometimes interpreted as implying people should feel ashamed about wanting to lose weight using this method.

Similarly, pressure-selling tactics, such as price-led messaging or limited-time deals, were not always considered appropriate in the context of medicines, particularly among non-users of injections, as they suggested that commercial priorities were being placed ahead of clinical or customer considerations.

## 5.6 Knowledge about POMs and their advertising restrictions is limited

Just under half of people in the UK are aware that GLP-1 weight-loss injections are POMs. Perceived ease of accessibility in some ads can give the impression that clinical approval is not required. A third of the UK population are unaware there are restrictions on the advertising of POMs in the UK.

## 6. What this means in practice: implications and next steps

**The research findings provide valuable insights into how people interpret ads for weight-loss services. The report will inform future ASA and CAP regulation in this sector.**

The research shows that people often interpret signals in ads as suggesting that a weight-loss injection is being offered, even when the medicine is not named. As a result, advertising for weight-loss services may still be interpreted as promoting a POM. The findings also show that people interpret these ads in different ways: some see them as promoting a medicated product, others as a weight-loss programme, and some as a combination of both. Advertisers in this sector should therefore be mindful that using signals associated with weight-loss injections may lead consumers to believe an ad is promoting a POM.

The research also reveals that only 20% of the UK population said they were happy with how their body looked, with just over two-fifths of respondents stating they had tried at least one of the weight-loss methods we asked them about. With 7 in 10 saying they had seen similar weight-loss ads in the past six months, the weight-loss market remains fertile ground for treatment providers, and the ASA expects to see continued advertising in this sector, including from prescribers of weight-loss POMs.

The research findings will inform the ASA's proactive monitoring of advertising in this sector and assessment of complaints as well as CAP compliance and enforcement activity; potential updates to CAP guidance; and continued engagement with industry, regulatory and statutory partners. They also provide insight for advertisers into how consumers are likely to interpret contemporary advertising approaches in this sector, to support compliance with the CAP Codes.

The ASA and CAP will continue to proactively monitor this sector, using our AI-powered Active Ad Monitoring system, and work with our regulatory partners to ensure compliance with the CAP Codes and the relevant medicines legislation. Our focus remains on supporting responsible business and ensuring that, as this market evolves, the public are protected.

# Contact us

Advertising Standards Authority  
Castle House  
37-45 Paul Street  
London EC2A 4LS

[www.asa.org.uk](http://www.asa.org.uk)