

Weight Loss, Miracle Medications & the Workplace

Article By:

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Whether you are picking up a well-respected periodical or a celebrity news magazine, you cannot avoid reading about semaglutide injection drugs – drugs used to control blood sugar levels for individuals with type 2 diabetes and weight loss. “Ubiquitous” is the only word to describe the news coverage of these “miracle medications.” As news has spread about these medications, their use has expanded far outside of Hollywood to individuals across the country, ultimately leading to a reported shortage. So, what impact, if any, does weight, weight loss, or the spread of such medications have on the workplace?

First, studies have long concluded that discrimination based on appearance, including weight, occurs in employment and other areas of life and that it may disproportionately impact a specific group or groups of individuals. Likely in response to such evidence, effective November 26, 2023, New York City passed a law protecting individuals who live or work in or visit New York City from discrimination based on their height or weight regarding employment, housing, and public accommodations. While New York City may be an early adopter of such a law, there may be more jurisdictions that follow this trend. Further, on the federal level, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has long taken the position that height and weight are generally unacceptable pre-employment inquiries as they may disproportionately impact employees of different protected characteristics. In short, weight has always impacted the workplace, including workplace decisions.

Second, there may be harassment or workplace bullying related to appearance, including weight. Harassment, whether sexual or based on other protected characteristics, can involve comments or actions related to the physical body and appearance. The same is true of bullying and targeting in the workplace. In today’s climate, where millions of employees are being prescribed or taking weight-loss drugs, this may include employees asking questions of a co-worker who has lost weight, asking whether a co-worker is taking a weight-loss drug, making comments including judgmental statements, stigmatizing such individuals, and similar behavior. While harassment and bullying related to appearance may not be new, such treatment based on the perception that an employee may be taking a weight-loss drug could be a more recent area with which human resources must grapple.

Third, workplace culture may be impacted by the recent focus on weight and weight loss medications, and the level of such impact may depend on several factors. For example, the employer’s geographic location, the industry, the overall focus on health and wellness in the workplace, and the employer’s commitment to inclusivity and belonging may all impact how weight and height will be

viewed, including using such weight loss medications.

At this juncture in history, where celebrities, media, and the American public are hyper-focused on weight, including weight-loss medications, what actions can employers consider? First, it is essential to continue fostering a positive and inclusive work environment that extends to weight, height, body shape, and appearance. Trainings, policies, town halls and education, and other visible commitments to such inclusivity can all support such a culture. Second, training managers, supervisors, and individuals involved in recruiting and hiring about weight/height discrimination and bias, the studies that have demonstrated its existence, and how these employees can foster an inclusive work environment and remove any relevant barriers that may exist. Lastly, employers may wish to review their current culture, policies, and benefits to determine if the employer is supporting the health and well-being of employees and their health journeys and whether there are areas of improvement.

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