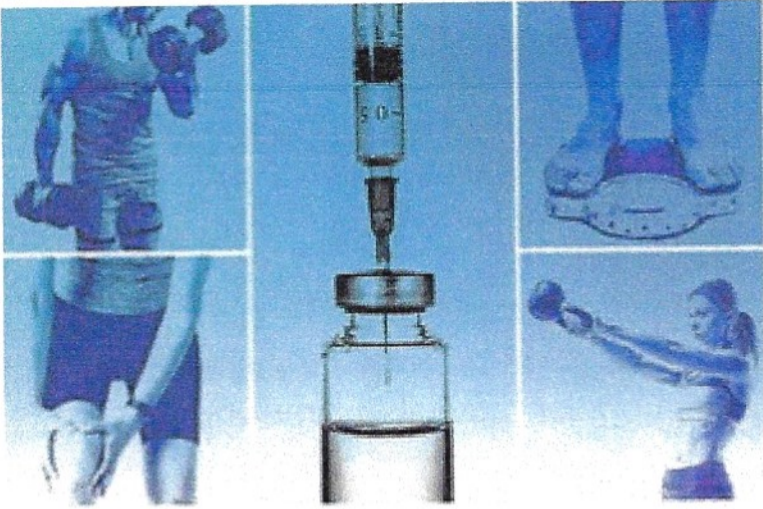


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JELENA SCOTTI/ WSJ; ISTOCK



YOUR HEALTH

Injectable Peptides Fad Worries Doctors

aime Garcia injects five different peptides into her body that she gets from a doctor and a telemedicine company.

The 44-year-old Los Angeles resident says the peptides have helped with myriad symptoms she has long struggled with due to a disorder of her autonomic nervous system. "It's been life-changing," she says of the four months she has been on the regimen.

Injectable peptides like BPC-157 and TB-500 are all the rage in Los Angeles and other places where wellness is an increasing focus. Testimonials flood TikTok and other social-media sites.

There is just one largely overlooked reality: Many of the substances have been largely illegal since 2023, when the Food and Drug Administration removed 19 peptides from a list of drugs that compounding pharmacies could make.

That could change. The FDA is convening panels later this year to discuss lifting restrictions to allow compounding pharmacies to make 12 of the peptides.

So what are peptides anyway?

Peptides are short chains of amino acids that can play roles in regulating hormones, releasing neurotransmitters and repairing tissue.

The peptides in question are synthetic ones. There are a few FDA-approved peptides, such as the popular GLP-1 weight-loss drugs. Other drugs are approved for specific conditions but are sometimes prescribed off-label for muscle mass and immune health, among other things. The popularity of injectable GLP-1 drugs has made injecting drugs more mainstream and accepted, say doctors.

What about the popular peptides all over social media?

Injectable peptides that aren't FDA approved include BPC-157, TB-500 and CJC-1295, commonly taken for gaining muscle, speeding up injury recovery, reducing inflammation, and general antiaging properties.

“They’re really just unapproved illegal drugs,” says Paul Knoepfler, a professor of cell biology and human anatomy at UC Davis School of Medicine.

Many patients want to know if such peptides can help them recover from musculoskeletal injuries or heal faster after surgery, says Dr. Alexander Weber, chief of sports medicine at the University of Southern California.

Weber’s response to peptide questions is simple. “As a physician these are non-FDA regulated, non-FDA approved injectables so the conversation I have with patients always starts with that,” says Weber.

“I don’t prescribe these medications. We have no long-term clinical data.”

Weber, Dr. Cory Mayfield, chief resident at USC orthopaedic surgery, and other researchers recently published a study in the American Journal of Sports Medicine where they reviewed the literature on popular injectable peptides. They found only one poorly done trial in humans.

Some of the animal studies showed promise but never advanced, says Mayfield.

What are the potential risks of nonapproved peptides?

Like many researchers, Dr. Luke Turnock, a senior lecturer in criminology at the University of Lincoln in the U.K., warns against taking peptides since we don’t know their short- or long-term effects.

The biggest worry is that peptides could increase cancer risk since many, like CJC-1295, increase growth hormone secretion or tissue growth. Some peptides like BPC-157 also stimulate new bloodvessel formation. That can promote growth of tumors.

Another concern is consumers—especially those “stacking” or taking multiple peptides—who may face long-term toxic effects, says Knoepfler. “It does seem like it might take five to 10 years to realize if a lot of people have kidney damage or not,” he says. “It can take like 10 years after being exposed to a carcinogen, or even 20 years for cancer to manifest.”

Products may also be contaminated, notes Dr. Shaila Pai-Verma, an internal medicine doctor at a concierge practice in Chicago.

“These are sterile stuff that you’re supposed to inject in your body,” says Pai-Verma. “Are they contaminated with heavy metals? Are they contaminated with bacteria? That’s a huge concern.”

Pai-Verma says she has seen patients with acute reactions like body rashes and even a patient with heavy metal poisoning.

Other short-term effects doctors have seen include blurred vision, skin rashes, anxiety, and depression. There are also potential risks from peptide interactions with prescription medications.

Can you get peptides offline?

Some doctors are already prescribing peptides.

Dr. Lisa Cassileth is founder and chief executive of The Practice Healthcare, a Beverly Hills plastic surgery and wellness concierge practice. Cassileth attended a peptide- certification course, where she became connected with compounding pharmacies in Texas and Florida. She obtains injectable peptides from them because, she says, there is less or no enforcement of how compounds made in such pharmacies are categorized.

Cassileth says she doesn’t condone buying peptides online. But she feels confident in the quality of the products she obtains because compounding pharmacies that prepare sterile injectables are required to test batches for potential contaminants and are regulated by state pharmacy boards.

Cassileth prescribes peptides largely to postsurgical patients for healing and reducing inflammation, but limits them with breast-cancer patients.

Will safety improve if the FDA lets compounding pharmacies make peptides?

Turnock doesn't think having compounding pharmacies legally make peptides will help much because they will likely source the active pharmaceutical ingredients from the same labs in China that online suppliers use.

But Scott Brunner, CEO of the Alliance for Pharmacy Compounding, says his group believes lifting restrictions would improve safety.

"We would argue that the black market and gray market for these substances right now is so robust that there is potential for patients to be harmed by some of these substances that purport to be a peptide," says Brunner.

Consumers take own action

Garcia, the Los Angeles resident, was initially nervous about injecting herself with peptides. "I have such anxiety about putting things in my body, like I won't even take ibuprofen sometimes," she says.

But after seeing her body's response, she says the pros outweigh any potential cons, though she does worry about long-term cancer risks.

Pai-Verma notes the irony of having patients eager to take unapproved peptides but wary of taking medications with long track records of safety and efficacy.

"It's so difficult to convince some of these patients to take statins which have so many studies backing them," she says, "and yet they are open to going and injecting themselves with peptides."

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