

2026-5-16

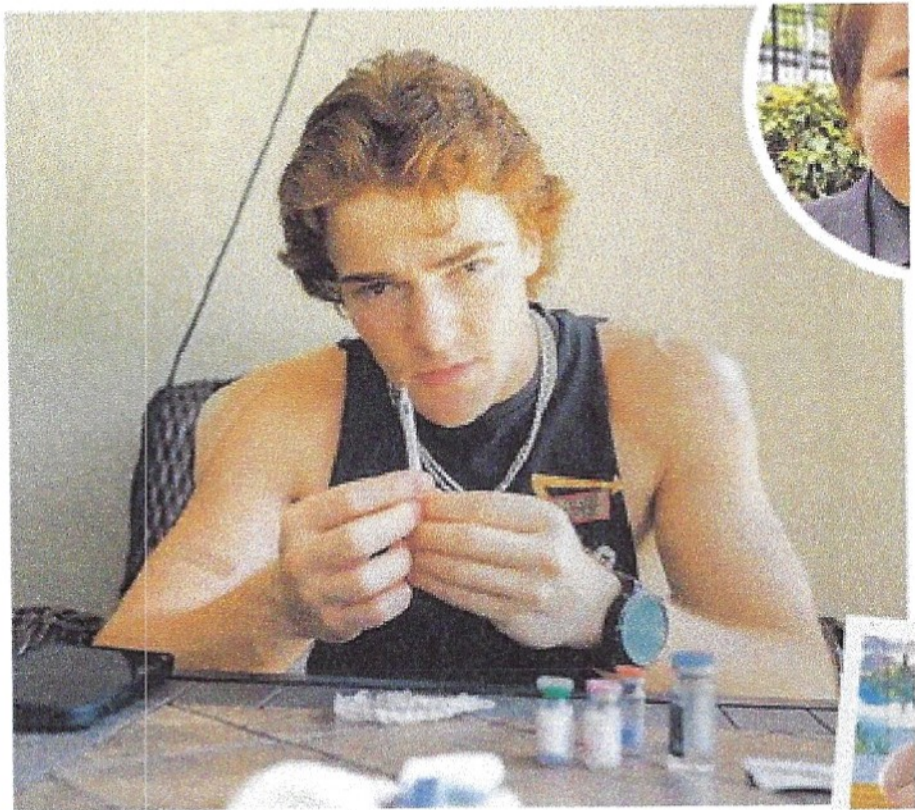
GTK

WSJ Print Edition



SAM HAYES FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE





For personal, non-commercial use only.

Trevor Larcom as he looks today, top, and as a child actor, above, who grew up overweight. Larcom has been injecting various peptides on and off for more than seven months.



1  
1  
e  
o  
n  
th  
  
re  
pe  
sa  
bia  
Wh  
he i  
abc  
pep  
his  
as 1

illy-

## Teen Boys and Young Men Are Injecting Peptides in Search of Perfection

**Shots that promise glowing skin and muscle growth have captivated ever-younger groups, including younger guys and even teenagers**

**BY SARA ASHLEY O'BRIEN**

For as long as he can remember, Trevor Larcom wanted to look different. He'd grown up overweight in the public eye as a child actor, appearing on the sitcoms "Fresh Off the Boat" and "Fuller House." He was 18 years old and 300 pounds when he turned his focus to working out and cutting calories.

Yet once he was down to 170 pounds, he still felt insecure. Dating wasn't going well. *What if I could change how my face is presented to people?* he recalled thinking.

"One of the first things I looked up was 'how to get a better jawline,'" said Larcom, now 22.

That's how he fell into the online world of looksmaxxing, where young men relentlessly pursue physical ideals. He dyed his eyebrows. He did neck exercises and chewed extra-firm gum that he'd seen looksmaxxers claim would help build the jawline's masseter muscles. And after seeing numerous before-and-after transformations, he ordered a peptide "stack," or a combination of several peptides for supposed enhanced results.

Unrealistic beauty standards have long saddled women and girls, from models to movie stars to the growing masses of GLP-1 users. Now, men and boys are facing their own heightened images of perfection: sharp jawlines, massive muscles, glowing skin.

Peptides promising physical transformations and muscle recovery have captivated young men and even teenagers aspiring to these new male beauty standards. The injectable drugs haven't undergone approval by the Food and Drug Administration and are currently sold primarily through an online gray market, where they're labeled for research use only. Still, many users are willing to push past safety warnings to achieve their physical goals. How far are they willing to go?

Larcom, who lives in Melbourne, Fla., ordered a three weeks' supply of Klow, a mixture of the peptides GHK-Cu, BPC157, TB500 and KPV, for \$65. The peptides were restricted under the Biden-era FDA, but the Trump administration has recently sought to make it legal for compounding pharmacies to produce them. Larcom has been taking it on and off for more than seven months.

He said he quickly noticed a difference in his recovery in the gym and a reduction in soreness. His skin quality has improved. He subsequently added other peptides to his "stack": Melanotan II, or MT-II (known as the "tanning peptide," changing the tint of skin because it boosts melanin production) and Semax, a synthetic nootropic peptide.

Larcom said he's seen "so many people who are younger—13, 14, 15, 16"—talking online about peptides, and that he worries about the younger trend: "Your body is not going to be developed."

"Foremost, they should be talking to their doctors," said Dr. Adda Grimberg, a pediatric endocrinologist and scientific director of the Growth Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, of teen peptide use.

Self-medicating with unapproved, unregulated drugs could throw off the body's homeostasis and introduce a host of side effects, she said. Of particular concern are growth-hormone peptides, which are popular with teenagers. After puberty, she said, growth hormone won't make bones grow long, but other parts of the body may grow disproportionately, including the hands, feet, jaw and tongue. The peptides could cause fluid changes and swelling in the joints and brain.

Grimberg said uncontrolled growth "is essentially cancer." She also noted the risk of contamination and a lack of dosing standardization, which apply to all peptides people are buying online without prescriptions.

Nathan Carranza, an 18-year-old high-school senior in the Bay Area, said he heard about peptides in the fall.

“My friend was bringing up peptides. He was really pale. He was the one who started to do more of the research and he found a peptide called Melano --tan II (MT-II). He started being like ‘I’m going to do this; maybe we can do this together,’ ” he said. Carranza didn’t want a tan, but he was looking to lose some body fat after ending his football career as a linebacker. “When I played football, I never had the chance to build a physique like I wanted. After it ended, I started to build the physique I wanted, through the gym and working out,” he said.

He and his friend ordered peptides together, with Carranza opting to purchase “reta,” short for retatrutide. Retatrutide is a weight-loss drug still in development by Eli Lilly that mimics three appetite-suppressing hormones, including GLP-1. But on-line, peptide sellers are offering “research-only” versions; in online forums, it is being referred to by nicknames like “reta” and “ratatouille.”

A spokesperson for Eli Lilly said retatrutide is an investigational molecule that is legally only available to participants in its clinical trials. “It has not been reviewed or approved by any regulatory agency in the world. No one should consider taking anything claiming to be retatrutide outside of a Lilly-sponsored clinical trial,” the spokesperson said in a statement.

The FDA has issued warning letters to companies selling unapproved GLP-1 and other products for “research purposes” and stated that the products “may pose serious health risks.”

Carranza said he paid about \$90 for his supply, which lasts him a month or two. “I got it shipped to the house, and my parents never saw the package,” he said—though he’s since found out that they take peptides, too.

“I cautioned him, ‘You’re still growing,’ ” said his mother, Nichol. “At some point, you have to release some control.”

She said she’s overheard her son and his friends teasing each other about things like high cortisol and high testosterone. “I thought it was funny, that level of knowledge about the chemicals in your body,” she said. “Their awareness is just different than previous generations.”

Dan Chioffi said that he started taking peptides at 22. “I was the first of my friends to try things out.”

He reached out to Edwin Lee, an endocrinologist in Florida and his college housemate’s father, for advice on the growth hormone secretagogue peptides. Lee runs Save Peptides, an organization fighting to “protect” peptides from FDA restrictions.

“I had already made up my mind, and I wanted to know the safest way to do it,” said Chioffi, who is based in Seattle.

“It’s really popular among college kids,” Lee said of peptides. “I don’t feel comfortable [with] the abuse of these growth-hormone peptides among college kids. They’re going to have longterm consequences,” he said.

Adults who are over 40 and suffering from frequent injuries might want to consider having their growth hormone levels checked, Lee said. Unless they have a growth-hormone deficiency, those in their 20s have no reason to be taking growth-hormone peptides, he added.

Several peptide users described “doing their own research”—a common refrain in the era of D.I.Y. health, referring to scouring the internet and social media for information—to find peptides.

Despite warnings from Lee against buying online, Chioffi said he decided to go directly to a Chinese supplier to make his purchases. Lee cautioned that sellers can easily fake their Certificate of Ingredients, or COI, put forth as a marker of confidence.

“Someone I know gave me their contact information. They have a giant sheet with their inventory,” said Chioffi, who communicates with the supplier on WhatsApp. “You do an international money transfer, and they ship it over to you.”

Chioffi believes his body has responded well to most of the peptides he has taken, which he says he monitors with frequent blood testing and through his Whoop wearable device. He said he is aware of the “valid concern” about taking

growth hormone peptides, but cited his youth and his lack of presenting symptoms as ways he manages that risk. He did, however, quickly stop using MT-II, the tanning peptide that years ago was dubbed the “Barbie peptide.”

“I didn’t like how it made some of my moles a little darker,” he said. The FDA has in the past warned of case reports that show the drug can have dangerous consequences, including melanoma.

“There’s probably a lot of things that I take that could possibly pose a risk of cancer to me,” said Larcom, the actor, who added that he heard of a friend who was taking MT-II recently and got diagnosed with skin cancer.

“For me, I’ve done the research on it,” Larcom said. “I know the risks I’m taking, and I think the potential benefit for me of possibly looking a little bit better, for me personally, that’s just the risk I’m willing to take.”

‘I don’t feel comfortable [with] the abuse of these growthhormone peptides.’

EDWIN LEE Endocrinologist

---

Copyright (c)2026 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved. 5/16/2026  
Powered by TECNAVIA

---

The following is a digital replica of content from the print newspaper and is intended for the personal use of our members. For commercial reproduction or distribution of Dow Jones printed content, contact: Dow Jones Reprints & Licensing at (800) 843-0008 or visit [djreprints.com](http://djreprints.com).

---

