

## Orlistat<sup>3</sup>

Orlistat is a lipase inhibitor which acts by reducing the absorption of dietary fat. About 30% of the fat that would otherwise be absorbed passes straight through to the large bowel.<sup>2</sup>

The manufacturers of orlistat are currently applying to have it made available OTC in the UK at a dose of 60 mg tds. This is being resisted by some members of the medical profession, who feel that the benefits would be minimal at this dose, particularly if ongoing professional support and monitoring was not available. They maintain that patients are likely to become demotivated if they do not see rapid results, and such an initiative would detract from the World Health Organisation's message about eating less and exercising more.<sup>4</sup> The counter argument is that the drug is safe, OTC does not preclude the option of professional support, and people should be free to spend money as they wish.<sup>5</sup>

### Criteria for prescribing<sup>2</sup>

A BMI of 28 kg/m<sup>2</sup> or more in the presence of significant co-morbidities (e.g. [Type 2 diabetes](#), [high blood pressure](#), [hyperlipidaemia](#)) OR a BMI of 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup> or more with no associated co-morbidities.

### Duration of treatment

- Treatment should only be continued beyond three months if a further 5% of body weight has been lost since start of treatment (this target may be made more lenient for type 2 diabetics).
- The use of drug treatment for longer than 12 months (usually for weight maintenance) should be made after discussing potential benefits and limitations with the patient.

### Effectiveness<sup>2,6</sup>

- Clinical trials suggest a moderate weight loss compared to placebo - about 2-5 kg over a year.
- There is a small but significant reduction in total cholesterol, the ratio of total cholesterol to high-density lipids, and systolic and diastolic blood pressure. This is thought to be due to reduction in body weight and total fat content, as well as redistribution of fat.
- Improvement of self-esteem and self-motivation at least as important as reduction in co-morbidity, based on quality-of-life estimates.
- Most patients gain weight after stopping treatment, but trials suggest it takes three years to gain weight lost in one year on the drug.
- An evaluation conducted in Italy found that orlistat demonstrated a good pharmaco-economic profile.<sup>7</sup>

### Contraindications<sup>3</sup>

- [Chronic malabsorption syndrome](#)
- [Cholestasis](#)
- Pregnancy - increased incidence of dilated cerebral ventricles in animal studies, no human studies available<sup>8</sup>
- Lactation - not known whether excreted in human milk<sup>8</sup>

### Cautions

Absorption of fat-soluble vitamins may be impaired. If on long-term therapy monitor A, D, E and beta-carotene levels and prescribe supplementation if appropriate.<sup>2,8,10-11</sup>

### Interactions<sup>3,12</sup>

Orlistat may affect the absorption of many drugs:

- [Cyclosporin](#) - orlistat may reduce cyclosporin bioavailability - monitor levels more frequently
- [Acarbose](#) - manufacturers advise avoid due to lack of pharmacokinetic data
- [Amiodarone](#) - may reduce plasma concentration
- [Coumarins](#) - anti-coagulant effect may be enhanced by interference with vitamin K absorption so INR should be monitored

### Common problems

- Liquid oily stools, faecal urgency, flatulence
- Less frequently, abdominal and rectal pain, headache, [menstrual irregularities](#), [anxiety](#), [fatigue](#)<sup>9</sup>

### Initiation<sup>2</sup>

- Check that patient qualifies according to NICE criteria.
- Check contraindications and interactions.
- Inform patient of benefits and limitations of drug treatment.
- Arrange provision of support for non-drug treatment and lifestyle changes.
- Prescribe one tablet before, during or after each main meal (dose may be missed if meal contains no fat).

### Monitoring<sup>1</sup>

- Check weight at 3 months and 6 months
- Monitoring of fat-soluble vitamin levels only necessary if patient not having a balanced diet
- Monitor adverse effects, mainly gastro-intestinal
- Monitor interactions