

GLP-1 Medications (Ozempic, Wegovy) and Your Surgery



GLP-1 medications are increasingly common and have implications worth discussing before surgery and anaesthesia.

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What this medication is

GLP-1 receptor agonists are a class of prescription medicines. You may know them by brand names like Ozempic or Wegovy. Your surgeon may refer to these as GLP-1s. These medications are primarily used to help manage type 2 diabetes and support weight loss in patients with obesity.

When you take this medication, it mimics a natural hormone in your body. This hormone helps regulate your blood sugar levels. It also sends signals to your brain that you feel full. This reduces your appetite and helps you eat less.

The medication also slows down how fast your stomach empties. This means food stays in your stomach longer. You may feel full for a longer time after eating. This slow digestion is a key part of how the drug works.

These medicines are becoming more common in orthopaedic surgery. Many patients on GLP-1s are undergoing procedures like joint replacement or spine surgery. Your surgical team needs to understand how this medication affects your body during the perioperative period. This includes the time before and after your operation.

Research shows these drugs can be a promising tool for preoperative weight loss. Losing weight before surgery can improve outcomes. However, the effects on bone health and surgical risks are still being studied. Current data suggests that using these medications around the time of surgery does not significantly increase short-term risks for many patients.

Your surgeon will review your medication list carefully. They will determine the best plan for your specific situation. Do not stop taking your medication without speaking to your doctor. Stopping suddenly can cause blood sugar spikes and weight regain. Your care team will guide you on how to manage this medication safely around your surgery date.

How it affects your surgery and anaesthetic

GLP-1 medications like Ozempic and Wegovy slow down how fast your stomach empties food into your intestines. This means food can stay in your stomach longer than usual. Because of this, you might still have stomach contents in your stomach even after you follow standard fasting rules before surgery.

This delay raises a specific risk during anaesthesia. If your stomach is not empty, there is a higher chance that stomach contents could come up and enter your lungs while you are sedated. This is called aspiration. It can cause serious breathing problems. Your anaesthetist knows this risk and plans for it carefully.

Current guidelines do not recommend stopping these medications before elective surgery. Stopping them too early can lead to high blood sugar levels and make it harder to control your weight. Instead, your medical team will manage the timing of your last dose and your fasting period. They may ask you to fast for a longer time than usual or adjust when you take your next dose.

Your anaesthetist may also use an ultrasound to check your stomach before you go to sleep. This quick, painless scan helps them see if there is still food or liquid in your stomach. This check ensures it is safe to start the anaesthesia.

While GLP-1 medications can slow stomach emptying, they may also offer some benefits during recovery. Some studies show that using these drugs around the time of joint replacement surgery is linked to fewer infections and fewer readmissions to the hospital. They do not appear to increase the risk of other major complications in the first 90 days after surgery.

Your surgeon and anaesthetist will work together to balance these factors. They will choose the safest plan for your specific health needs. Please tell your surgical team exactly when you last took your GLP-1 medication. This information helps them keep you safe during your operation.

What you should do

Tell your surgeon, anaesthetist, and GP that you take GLP-1 medications like Ozempic or Wegovy. These drugs help with weight loss and blood sugar control before surgery. They may also lower your risk of infection and readmission. However, they can slow your stomach emptying. This means you might keep food in your stomach longer than usual.

Do not stop taking your medication on your own. Stopping it can raise your blood sugar levels and make weight control harder. Your prescribing doctor will decide if you should pause the drug before your procedure. Follow their specific instructions about fasting and timing. If you are unsure about what to do, ask your care team for clear guidance.