

GLP-1s and GI Considerations

What Your Digestive System Needs You to Know About GLP-1 Therapy

GLP-1 Medications and Your Digestive System

GLP-1 receptor agonists significantly affect your gastrointestinal system. Understanding these effects helps you manage side effects and know when to seek medical attention.

How GLP-1s Affect Your GI Tract

Delayed Gastric Emptying: GLP-1 medications slow how fast food leaves your stomach. This is the primary mechanism for appetite reduction, but it also causes most GI side effects. Normal gastric emptying takes 4-5 hours; on GLP-1 therapy, this can extend to 6-8+ hours.

Gastroparesis Risk

In some patients, GLP-1-induced gastric slowing can become severe enough to resemble gastroparesis (delayed gastric emptying disorder). Symptoms include:

- Persistent nausea and vomiting beyond the initial adjustment period
- Feeling full after only a few bites
- Bloating and upper abdominal distension
- Acid reflux and heartburn

If these symptoms persist beyond 8 weeks or worsen, contact your provider. A temporary dose reduction or hold may be needed.

Important: GLP-1s and Endoscopy

If you are scheduled for an endoscopy, colonoscopy, or any procedure requiring anesthesia:

- **Inform your GI provider** that you take a GLP-1 medication
- **Follow fasting instructions carefully** — GLP-1s delay gastric emptying, increasing aspiration risk during sedation
- **Your provider may ask you to hold your GLP-1** for 1-2 weeks before procedures requiring sedation (per ASA 2023 guidance)
- **A liquid diet for 24-48 hours** before the procedure may be recommended

Gallbladder Considerations

Rapid weight loss from any cause (including GLP-1 therapy) increases the risk of gallstone formation. Clinical trials show a 1.5-2.5% incidence of gallbladder events with semaglutide. Watch for:

- Right upper quadrant pain, especially after fatty meals
- Nausea and vomiting not related to the medication adjustment period
- Fever with abdominal pain

Pancreatitis Awareness

While rare, pancreatitis has been reported with GLP-1 medications. Know the warning signs:

- Severe, persistent upper abdominal pain radiating to the back
- Pain that worsens after eating
- Nausea and vomiting that is different from your usual GLP-1 side effects

Seek immediate medical attention if you suspect pancreatitis. Do not wait.

Managing Constipation on GLP-1 Therapy

- Stay well-hydrated — aim for 64 oz of water daily
- Incorporate fiber gradually (psyllium husk, vegetables, whole grains)
- Light daily physical activity stimulates bowel motility
- If persistent, your provider may recommend a stool softener or osmotic laxative
- Avoid stimulant laxatives for chronic use

Need Personalized Guidance?

MilenAi Digestive Health offers telehealth consultations with a registered nurse specializing in gastroenterology and digestive health. Get one-on-one support for your questions, medication management, and care coordination.

Schedule a Telehealth Visit

milenai.health | consult@milenai.health

Licensed RN — Nevada, California, New York

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