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## COMMENTARY

# Don't Hold Fast to This Surgical Rule

Studies show it's safer to have a nutritious drink before an operation.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By *Hakim Bouzamondo*

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Imagine you're heading into surgery for a hip fracture. You might be anxious about how it will go and nervous about starting rehab. You also probably are hungry and thirsty. For decades, patients have been told to fast before surgery. Eight in 10 say their doctors instructed them to, according to a 2017 survey commissioned by my company, Abbott, and conducted by Clarus Research.

The practice dates back to the 1850s, when physicians worried that patients who ate before receiving anesthetics might be at risk of regurgitating and choking. But today's technology makes this outcome unlikely. The latest research shows that drinking a carbohydrate beverage—Abbott makes one version—up to two hours before an operation can ease some of the most common side effects of anesthesia and surgery, like nausea, pain or vomiting. Proper nutrition before and after an operation can reduce the chance of infection, too.

Surgery may seem like a passive activity. How taxing, after all, can lying on an operating table be? But in reality, a body undergoing surgery works vigorously due to metabolic stress—with results that are similar to running a marathon. A 200-pound person can burn about 3,000 calories and lose a significant amount of muscle glycogen, a stored form of carbohydrates, during an operation. Would you tell an athlete not to eat or drink after midnight before the big race?

Hospitals in Europe have long allowed carbohydrate-rich drinks before surgery, with positive outcomes. A protocol in effect across Europe called ERAS, or Enhanced Recovery After Surgery, emphasizes good nutrition—specifically the consumption of fluids and carbohydrates—and has helped shorten hospital stays and reduce complications for some surgeries by 50%.

As similar guidelines are being adopted in the U.S., hospitals are accumulating more proof that they work. At the University of Michigan, implementing a pre-operative program that included nutrition and exercise was shown to get patients out of the hospital two days faster and cut patient costs by 28%.

A study published in May by JAMA Surgery examined a comprehensive recovery program put in place at 20 Kaiser Permanente medical centers. The study, which included more than 15,000 patients, concluded that the program was associated with a one-third reduction in complication rates, decreased mortality and shortened hospital stays.

Implementing similar enhanced-recovery programs across the country would not only quicken and improve surgical results, it would save money. After all, a day in an average U.S. hospital runs about \$2,000.

Virtually every American will undergo a surgical procedure someday. Encouraging patients to load up on the right nutrients, like marathoners prepping for a race, could make those procedures safer and help patients bounce back stronger.

*Dr. Bouzamondo is a physician and divisional vice president of global research and development for Abbott's nutrition division.*

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