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The Truth About GLP-1s and Blindness, According to Experts

Making sense of the headlines.

Tatiana Bido

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By now, chances are you or someone you know is on a GLP-1 medication like Wegovy or Zepbound. Use of these drugs has surged in recent years, and according to the CDC, about 1 in 12 American adults now has a GLP-1 prescription. So when a June 2024 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA Ophthalmology)* suggested a possible link between GLP-1 use and vision loss, headlines warning of blindness spread quickly across news outlets and social media.

Experts say the reality is far less alarming. “The study in JAMA is in opposition to another recent analysis which showed a decrease,” says obesity expert and lipid specialist Dr. Spencer Nadolsky. “As we gather more data, we’ll need to continue to discuss **potential risks** and benefits with patients.”

Featured Experts

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Dr. Spencer Nadolsky is an obesity and lipid specialist

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Dr. Jonathan Brugger is a board-certified ophthalmologist in Charleston, South Carolina

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Dr. David Schlessinger is a board-certified oculoplastic surgeon in New York

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What the research shows

On his *Doctors Who Lift* podcast, Dr. Nadolsky invited Charleston, SC ophthalmologist Jonathan Brugger, MD to help break down the findings. The study, which focused on patients with type 2 diabetes, reported a slightly higher rate of wet age-related macular degeneration (AMD) in those on semaglutide compared to those who weren’t: about 2 in 1,000 cases versus 1 in 1,000. While that doubling raised eyebrows, experts stress the absolute numbers are very small. “The absolute numbers seem really small to me...I’m not alarmed at all,” says Dr. Brugger.

A separate condition, **nonarteritic anterior ischemic optic neuropathy (NAION)**, has also been linked to semaglutide in newer research. It’s a rare optic nerve injury sometimes described as a “stroke of the eye,” which can cause sudden, irreversible vision loss. Ophthalmologists note that the number of reported cases is extremely small, patients with diabetes already carry higher baseline risk.

Should GLP-1 users be worried?

Not according to the doctors who see these conditions in practice. “As of now there is no concrete evidence that it causes vision loss and the American Academy of Ophthalmology has not issued any warnings,” says New York oculoplastic surgeon Q David Schlessinger, MD. “Further studies are needed, and patients should discuss this with their ophthalmologists and primary care doctors.” Dr. Brugger adds, “The bottom line is that, as a retina specialist, you’re not concerned with this. If anything, there might even be a benefit.”

What if I have diabetes?

People with diabetes already face higher risks for complications like diabetic retinopathy, which is why regular screenings are standard regardless of medication. Dr. Schlessinger points out that many patients in these studies already had advanced disease before starting treatment, which makes it difficult to pin new changes directly on the medication.

What if I don’t have diabetes and I’m taking a GLP-1 for weight loss?

The JAMA analysis applied to patients with type 2 diabetes. For those using **GLP-1s for weight loss**, experts say the AMD findings are even less likely to apply. “Your risk really comes down to whether you have underlying macular degeneration,” explains Dr. Brugger. “I don’t think you’re necessarily increasing your risk with **these medications**.”

The takeaway

Research on GLP-1s and vision is still evolving, but current evidence should reassure rather than alarm. One study raised the question of a very small increased risk of AMD, while another found signs of protection. Other studies have raised the possibility of a link between semaglutide and NAION, but experts emphasize how rare the condition is and how uncertain the connection remains.

For now, the consensus among ophthalmologists and endocrinologists is clear: GLP-1s are not causing widespread blindness. More importantly, these medications are helping patients lose weight, manage blood sugar and reduce serious health risks.

As Dr. Nadolsky puts it: “Right now the benefits far outweigh the risks.”

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