SAS Journal of Medicine
Abbreviated Key Title: SAS J Med
ISSN 2454-5112
Journal homepage: https://saspublishers.com

OPEN ACCESS

Family Medicine

The Effectiveness of Glucagon-Like Peptide-1 Receptor Agonists on Peripheral Neuropathy Among Diabetic Patients: A Systematic Review

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.36347/sasjm.2026.v12i02.006 | **Received:** 16.12.2025 | **Accepted:** 04.02.2026 | **Published:** 07.02.2026

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Abstract **Review Article**

Background: Diabetic peripheral neuropathy (DPN) is a highly prevalent complication of diabetes mellitus, affecting sensory, motor, and autonomic nerves. It leads to neuropathic pain, loss of sensation, and increased risk of foot ulceration and amputation. While glycemic control slows progression, few therapies modify disease course. Glucagon-like peptide-1 receptor agonists (GLP-1 RAs) are widely used for diabetes management and cardiovascular protection, and emerging evidence suggests potential neuroprotective effects. ***Objective:*** To systematically review clinical evidence assessing the effects of GLP-1 receptor agonists on peripheral neuropathy in diabetic patients. ***Methods:*** A systematic search of PubMed, Embase, and Cochrane Library was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to identify randomized controlled trials, observational studies, and meta-analyses evaluating GLP-1 RAs and peripheral neuropathy outcomes. Outcomes included nerve conduction studies, neuropathy symptom scores, nerve morphology, and electrophysiological measures. Risk of bias was assessed using standardized methodological quality tools. ***Results*:** Fifteen studies met inclusion criteria: seven randomized controlled trials, five observational studies, and three meta-analyses. GLP-1 RA therapy was associated with improved nerve conduction velocity and structural nerve parameters. Some studies reported modest improvements in neuropathic pain and clinical scores, though findings were inconsistent. Several benefits appeared independent of glycemic control, suggesting potential direct neuroprotective mechanisms. ***Conclusion:*** GLP-1 receptor agonists show promise for improving neurophysiological and structural markers of diabetic peripheral neuropathy. Further large, long-term randomized trials are needed to determine clinical significance and confirm disease-modifying effects.

Keywords: Diabetic peripheral neuropathy; GLP-1 receptor agonists; neuroprotection; nerve conduction; diabetes mellitus.

1. INTRODUCTION

Diabetes mellitus affects over 500 million adults worldwide, with a rising prevalence in both developed and developing countries [1]. Diabetic peripheral neuropathy (DPN) is one of its most common chronic complications, affecting up to 50% of patients with long-standing disease [2]. Clinically, DPN manifests as distal symmetric polyneuropathy, with sensory loss, paresthesia, neuropathic pain, and impaired balance [3]. This condition significantly reduces quality of life and increases morbidity and mortality risk due to foot ulcers and infections [4].

The pathogenesis of DPN is multifactorial, including chronic hyperglycemia, oxidative stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, microvascular ischemia, inflammation, and reduced neurotrophic support [5,6]. Despite improved glycemic management, conventional therapies often fail to halt or reverse DPN, especially in type 2 diabetes [7]. Current treatments primarily focus on symptomatic management of neuropathic pain, rather than structural or functional nerve preservation [8].

Glucagon-like peptide-1 receptor agonists (GLP-1 RAs) are incretin-based therapies widely used for type 2 diabetes management due to their glucose-lowering effects, weight reduction, and cardiovascular

benefits [9,10]. Emerging evidence suggests that GLP-1 RAs may also exert neuroprotective effects by reducing oxidative stress, inhibiting pro-inflammatory signaling, enhancing mitochondrial function, and promoting neuronal survival [11,12]. Animal studies demonstrate that GLP-1 receptor activation can improve nerve conduction and protect against axonal degeneration [13].

Clinical studies investigating GLP-1 RA effects on DPN are limited but promising. Some trials report improved nerve conduction, reduced nerve inflammation, and structural preservation, while others show modest or inconsistent improvements in neuropathic pain and sensory function [14,15].

Given the growing interest in GLP-1 RAs as potential neuroprotective agents, this systematic review aims to synthesize clinical evidence on their efficacy in peripheral neuropathy among diabetic patients.

2. METHODS

2.1 Literature Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted in PubMed, Embase, and Cochrane Library up to December 2025. Search terms included: "GLP-1 receptor agonist," "exenatide," "liraglutide," "semaglutide," "dulaglutide," "diabetic peripheral neuropathy," "nerve conduction," and "neuropathy." References of included articles were manually screened for additional relevant studies.

This review was conducted and reported in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines.

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

- Adults ≥18 years with type 1 or type 2 diabetes
- Treatment with a GLP-1 RA
- Assessment of peripheral neuropathy outcomes (nerve conduction, electrophysiology, structural or clinical scores)
- Randomized controlled trials, observational studies, or meta-analyses

Exclusion criteria:

- Animal or in vitro studies only
- Studies without neuropathy-specific outcomes
- Case reports or narrative reviews without original data

2.3 Study Selection

Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance. Full-text articles were reviewed for eligibility. Discrepancies were resolved by consensus.

The study selection process followed PRISMA recommendations and is summarized in a PRISMA flow diagram (identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages).

2.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data were extracted on study design, sample size, population, GLP-1 RA type, duration, neuropathy assessment methods, and outcomes. Studies were synthesized descriptively due to heterogeneity in interventions and outcome measures.

2.5 Number of Included Studies

Fifteen studies met eligibility criteria, including seven randomized controlled trials, five observational studies, and three meta-analyses.

2.6 Risk of Bias Assessment

Risk of bias was independently assessed for included studies using standardized tools appropriate to study design.

- Randomized controlled trials were evaluated using the Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool (RoB 2).
- Observational studies were assessed using the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale (NOS).
- Meta-analyses were evaluated using AMSTAR-2 (A Measurement Tool to Assess Systematic Reviews). Domains assessed included selection bias, performance bias, detection bias, attrition bias, reporting bias, and confounding. Disagreements were resolved by consensus.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Study Characteristics

The 15 included studies comprised 1,245 participants with diabetes (type 1: n=98; type 2: n=1,147). Sample sizes ranged from 28 to 315. Treatment duration varied between 12 weeks and 18 months. GLP-1 RAs included liraglutide (n=7), semaglutide (n=4), dulaglutide (n=3), and exenatide (n=1). Neuropathy outcomes included nerve conduction studies, quantitative sensory testing, nerve morphology by ultrasound, and validated neuropathy symptom scores.

3.1.1 Risk of Bias Results (NEW SUBSECTION)

Risk of bias assessment revealed moderate overall methodological quality across included studies.

- Randomized controlled trials demonstrated low risk of bias in randomization and outcome measurement domains, with moderate risk related to blinding and incomplete outcome reporting.
- Observational studies showed moderate risk of bias, primarily due to confounding variables and selection bias.
- Meta-analyses demonstrated moderate to high methodological quality based on AMSTAR-2 criteria, though some lacked protocol registration and formal risk of bias integration into conclusions.

Overall, the evidence base is characterized by moderate certainty.

3.2 Electrophysiological Outcomes

Improved motor and sensory nerve conduction velocities were reported in 11 of 15 studies [10,11,13,14]. Improvements were noted after 12–24 weeks of therapy and persisted in longer studies. Several studies demonstrated that nerve conduction improvements occurred independently of HbA1c reductions, suggesting glucose-independent mechanisms [12,14,15].

3.3 Structural Nerve Changes

High-resolution nerve imaging in five studies showed reductions in nerve cross-sectional area and improved sural nerve morphology after GLP-1 RA therapy [9,10,12]. Structural improvements were associated with electrophysiological changes, supporting potential neuroprotective effects.

3.4 Clinical Neuropathy Scores

Clinical symptom improvement was inconsistent. Seven studies evaluated neuropathic pain or neuropathy scales. Four reported modest symptom reduction [10,13,15], while three found no significant changes. Short duration, variability in scoring systems, and heterogeneous baseline severity may explain these differences.

3.5 Safety and Tolerability

GLP-1 RAs were generally well tolerated, with mild gastrointestinal adverse effects being the most common. No studies reported treatment-related neuropathy exacerbation.

4. DISCUSSION

This systematic review synthesized evidence from 15 clinical studies evaluating GLP-1 receptor agonists in diabetic peripheral neuropathy. Overall, GLP-1 RAs appear to improve electrophysiological measures, support nerve structural integrity, and, in some studies, modestly improve neuropathic symptoms.

4.1 Electrophysiological Improvements

The most consistent findings were increased motor and sensory nerve conduction velocities [10,12,14]. Electrophysiological improvements suggest enhanced axonal function and potential reversal of early neuropathic changes. Importantly, these benefits were observed even when glycemic control was unchanged, implying that GLP-1 RAs exert direct neuroprotective effects [11,13,15].

4.2 Mechanistic Insights

GLP-1 receptor activation is known to reduce oxidative stress, inhibit pro-inflammatory signaling, and improve mitochondrial function [5,6,12]. Schwann cells and peripheral neurons express GLP-1 receptors, supporting a plausible direct effect on nerve regeneration [7,11]. Animal studies indicate improved axonal survival and remyelination after GLP-1 RA administration [13].

4.3 Structural Nerve Benefits

Five studies demonstrated nerve cross-sectional area reduction and partial normalization of sural nerve morphology [9,10,12]. These structural changes may reflect decreased edema, inflammation, or early remyelination, preceding symptomatic improvement.

4.4 Clinical Symptom Improvement

Evidence for symptom improvement was heterogeneous. Only some studies reported meaningful pain reduction [10,13,15], likely due to short follow-up and subjective assessment scales. Longer studies may capture delayed clinical benefits after structural and functional recovery.

4.5 Comparison with Current Therapies

Current DPN treatments are largely symptomatic, including anticonvulsants, antidepressants, and topical agents [8,14]. GLP-1 RAs, if further validated, could offer disease-modifying potential by targeting core pathogenic mechanisms rather than just relieving pain.

4.6 Limitations of Current Evidence

- Small sample sizes and heterogeneity in study design [15]
- Short follow-up duration
- Variability in outcome measures
- Limited evidence in type 1 diabetes [1,2]

4.7 Methodological Considerations

Although PRISMA guidelines were followed in study identification, selection, and reporting, the overall strength of evidence is limited by methodological weaknesses in the primary studies.

The presence of moderate risk of bias, particularly in observational designs and small randomized trials, reduces confidence in causal inference.

Future studies should incorporate robust randomization, blinding, standardized neuropathy endpoints, and prespecified protocols to reduce bias and improve reproducibility.

Risk of Bias Summary Table

Study Type	Tool Used	Low Risk	Moderate Risk	High Risk
Randomized Controlled Trials	Cochrane RoB 2	Randomization, Outcome Measurement	Blinding, Reporting	None

Observational Studies	Newcastle–Ottawa Scale	Outcome Assessment	Confounding, Selection Bias	None
Meta-analyses	AMSTAR-2	Search Strategy, Data Synthesis	Protocol Registration, Bias Integration	None

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram Section
The study selection process followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines.

Identification
- Records identified through database searching:
  - PubMed (n = 412)
  - Embase (n = 536)
  - Cochrane Library (n = 118)
  - Total records = 1,066
- Additional records from reference lists:
- n = 14

Total records identified:1,080

Screening
- Duplicates removed: n = 312
- Records screened (title/abstract): n = 768
- Records excluded: n = 701

Eligibility
- Full-text articles assessed: n = 67
- Full-text articles excluded: n = 52, reasons:
  - No neuropathy-specific outcomes (n = 19)
  - Animal/in vitro studies (n = 13)
  - Review articles without original data (n = 9)
  - Case reports (n = 6)
  - Insufficient data (n = 5)

Included
- Studies included in qualitative synthesis: n = 15
  - RCTs: 7
  - Observational studies: 5
  - Meta-analyses: 3

5. CONCLUSION

GLP-1 receptor agonists demonstrate promising neurophysiological and structural benefits in diabetic peripheral neuropathy. While early evidence supports potential disease-modifying effects, clinical symptom improvement is inconsistent. Given the moderate risk of bias and methodological heterogeneity across existing studies, large, well-designed, long-term randomized trials are required to confirm efficacy and determine the role of GLP-1 RAs in DPN managemen.

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