Journal of Population Therapeutics & Clinical Pharmacology

RESEARCH ARTICLE
DOI: 10.53555/wnw01y50

# EVALUATION OF EARLY POSTOPERATIVE FEEDING VS. TRADITIONAL FEEDING AFTER ABDOMINAL SURGERY

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**Abstract**

**Background:** Traditional postoperative feeding protocols after abdominal surgery involve prolonged fasting until bowel function recovery, while early feeding approaches challenge this paradigm. This study evaluated the safety and efficacy of early postoperative feeding compared to traditional feeding protocols in patients undergoing abdominal surgery.

**Methods:** A prospective randomized controlled trial was conducted at NIMS Jaipur from July to December 2012. One hundred twenty patients undergoing elective abdominal surgery were randomly allocated to early feeding (n=60) or traditional feeding groups (n=60). Early feeding commenced within 6-8 hours postoperatively, while traditional feeding began after bowel sounds returned. Primary outcomes included postoperative complications, hospital stay duration, and recovery parameters. Secondary outcomes assessed nutritional status, patient satisfaction, and healthcare costs.

**Results:** The early feeding group demonstrated significantly lower overall complications (13.3% vs. 30.0%, p=0.032), reduced hospital stay (4.2±1.8 vs. 6.8±2.4 days, p<0.001), and faster recovery of gastrointestinal function. Time to first bowel movement was shorter (18.6±8.4 vs. 32.4±12.6 hours, p<0.001), with reduced incidence of ileus (3.3% vs. 13.3%, p=0.049) and nausea/vomiting (20.0% vs. 36.7%, p=0.046). Laboratory parameters showed better maintenance of nutritional status, with higher albumin levels (3.8±0.3 vs. 3.4±0.4 g/dl, p<0.001) on postoperative day 7. Patient satisfaction scores were significantly higher (8.4±1.2 vs. 6.8±1.6, p<0.001), and healthcare costs were reduced by 33%.

**Conclusion:** Early postoperative feeding is safe and superior to traditional feeding protocols, resulting in reduced complications, shorter hospital stays, better nutritional status, and improved patient satisfaction. These findings support implementing early feeding as standard postoperative care in abdominal surgery.

**Keywords:** Early feeding, postoperative nutrition, abdominal surgery, enhanced recovery, traditional feeding

## Introduction

Postoperative nutrition management following abdominal surgery has undergone significant evolution over the past several decades, challenging traditional paradigms and introducing evidence-based approaches that prioritize patient recovery and minimize complications. The conventional

approach to postoperative feeding after abdominal surgery historically involved prolonged fasting periods, often extending for several days until the return of bowel sounds and passage of flatus, based on the theoretical concern of anastomotic complications and the belief that the gastrointestinal tract required extended rest for optimal healing (Reissman et al., 1995).

Traditional postoperative feeding protocols were rooted in the principle of "nil per os" (nothing by mouth) until clear evidence of gastrointestinal function recovery. This approach, while seemingly conservative and safe, has been increasingly questioned as mounting evidence suggests that early enteral nutrition may offer superior outcomes in terms of wound healing, immune function, and overall patient recovery. The physiological basis for early feeding lies in the understanding that the gastrointestinal tract maintains its absorptive capacity shortly after surgery, and that early nutrition can stimulate gut motility, preserve intestinal barrier function, and reduce the risk of bacterial translocation (Lewis et al., 2009).

The concept of early postoperative feeding encompasses the initiation of oral intake within 24-48 hours following surgery, regardless of the presence of bowel sounds or passage of flatus. This approach represents a fundamental shift from the traditional teaching that emphasized waiting for clear signs of gastrointestinal function recovery. Early feeding protocols have been supported by numerous international studies demonstrating reduced hospital stay, lower infection rates, and improved patient satisfaction scores (Andersen et al., 2006).

The Enhanced Recovery After Surgery (ERAS) protocols have revolutionized perioperative care by incorporating early feeding as a cornerstone of accelerated recovery programs. These evidence-based guidelines emphasize the importance of early nutrition in maintaining protein synthesis, supporting immune function, and promoting wound healing (Fearon et al., 2005). The physiological rationale for early feeding is supported by research demonstrating that the small intestine retains its absorptive capacity even in the immediate postoperative period, and that early nutrition can stimulate the release of gut hormones that promote motility and healing (Soop et al., 2001).

Several landmark studies have demonstrated the safety and efficacy of early postoperative feeding. Research conducted in various surgical specialties has consistently shown that patients who receive early nutrition experience shorter hospital stays, reduced complications, and improved quality of life measures (Barlow et al., 2011). The mechanisms underlying these benefits include preservation of gut barrier function, maintenance of immune competence, and reduction in the stress response associated with surgical trauma.

The implementation of early feeding protocols requires careful consideration of patient selection, surgical factors, and institutional capabilities. Contraindications to early feeding include certain high-risk procedures, compromised anastomoses, and specific patient comorbidities that may predispose to complications (Lassen et al., 2009). The success of early feeding programs depends on multidisciplinary collaboration between surgical teams, nursing staff, and nutritionists to ensure proper implementation and monitoring.

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting early postoperative feeding, adoption of these protocols remains variable across different healthcare settings. Barriers to implementation include traditional teaching, concerns about complications, and institutional resistance to change. Indian studies have shown promising results with early feeding protocols, with Sharma et al. (2010) demonstrating reduced hospital stay and complications in patients undergoing emergency laparotomy when early enteral feeding was implemented compared to traditional feeding approaches.

The need for well-designed comparative studies in diverse populations, including Indian patients, remains critical for establishing optimal feeding protocols that consider cultural, dietary, and genetic factors that may influence recovery outcomes. Recent randomized controlled trials have provided compelling evidence that early feeding is not only safe but beneficial across various abdominal surgical procedures (Dag et al., 2011). The paradigm shift towards early postoperative feeding represents a significant advancement in surgical care, moving away from empirical practices towards evidence-based protocols that prioritize patient outcomes and recovery optimization.

The aim of this study was to evaluate the safety, efficacy, and clinical outcomes of early postoperative feeding compared to traditional feeding protocols in patients undergoing abdominal surgery, with specific focus on postoperative complications, length of hospital stay, and patient satisfaction scores.

## Methodology

### Study Design

A prospective randomized controlled trial

### Study Site

The research was conducted at the National Institute of Medical Sciences (NIMS), Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

### Study Duration

The study was conducted over a period of six months, from July 2012 to December 2012.

### Sampling and Sample Size

A systematic random sampling technique was employed to recruit eligible patients undergoing abdominal surgery during the study period. The sample size was calculated using power analysis with an alpha error of 0.05, power of 80%, and expected difference in mean hospital stay of 1.5 days between groups. Based on pilot data and previous studies, a sample size of 120 patients (60 in each group) was determined to be adequate for detecting clinically significant differences between the two feeding protocols. Patients were randomly allocated to either the early feeding group or the traditional feeding group using computer-generated random numbers sealed in opaque envelopes.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria comprised patients aged 18-65 years undergoing elective abdominal surgery including appendectomy, cholecystectomy, hernia repair, and bowel resection procedures, with American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) physical status I-II, and ability to provide informed consent. Exclusion criteria included emergency surgery, patients with severe comorbidities (cardiac, pulmonary, renal, or hepatic dysfunction), history of inflammatory bowel disease, previous abdominal surgery with adhesions, pregnancy, inability to take oral feeds due to anatomical reasons, and patients requiring intensive care unit admission postoperatively.

### Data Collection Tools and Techniques

Data collection was performed using a standardized case record form designed specifically for this study. The form included demographic information, surgical details, postoperative complications, feeding tolerance, hospital stay duration, and patient satisfaction scores. Clinical assessments were conducted by trained research personnel at predetermined intervals (6, 12, 24, 48, and 72 hours postoperatively). Standardized scales were used for pain assessment (Visual Analog Scale), nausea and vomiting scoring, and patient satisfaction measurement. Laboratory parameters including hemoglobin, total protein, albumin, and white blood cell count were recorded preoperatively and on postoperative days 1, 3, and 7.

### Data Management and Statistical Analysis

All collected data were entered into a computerized database using SPSS version 20.0. Data quality was ensured through double entry and validation procedures. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize baseline characteristics, with continuous variables expressed as means and standard deviations, and categorical variables as frequencies and percentages. Comparative analysis between groups was performed using independent t-tests for continuous variables and chi-square tests for categorical variables. Multivariate analysis was conducted to identify independent predictors of outcomes while controlling for potential confounders. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant for all analyses.

**Ethical Considerations**

The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of NIMS Jaipur prior to commencement. All patients provided written informed consent after detailed explanation of the study objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits.

**Results**

**Table 1: Baseline Demographic and Clinical Characteristics of Study Participants**

| Characteristics | Early Feeding Group (n=60) | Traditional Feeding Group (n=60) | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age (years), mean ± SD | 42.3 ± 14.2 | 44.1 ± 13.8 | 0.456 |
| Gender, n (%) | | | |
| Male | 34 (56.7) | 32 (53.3) | 0.721 |
| Female | 26 (43.3) | 28 (46.7) | |
| BMI (kg/m²), mean ± SD | 24.6 ± 3.8 | 25.1 ± 4.2 | 0.487 |
| ASA Status, n (%) | | | |
| ASA I | 38 (63.3) | 35 (58.3) | 0.592 |
| ASA II | 22 (36.7) | 25 (41.7) | |
| Comorbidities, n (%) | | | |
| Diabetes Mellitus | 8 (13.3) | 11 (18.3) | 0.465 |
| Hypertension | 12 (20.0) | 14 (23.3) | 0.673 |
| Preoperative Hemoglobin (g/dl) | 11.8 ± 1.6 | 11.6 ± 1.4 | 0.467 |
| Preoperative Albumin (g/dl) | 3.9 ± 0.5 | 3.8 ± 0.6 | 0.323 |

**Table 2: Surgical Procedures and Operative Characteristics**

| Surgical Procedure | Early Feeding Group (n=60) | Traditional Feeding Group (n=60) | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Appendectomy, n (%) | 18 (30.0) | 16 (26.7) | 0.699 |
| Cholecystectomy, n (%) | 22 (36.7) | 24 (40.0) | 0.722 |
| Hernia Repair, n (%) | 12 (20.0) | 14 (23.3) | 0.673 |
| Bowel Resection, n (%) | 8 (13.3) | 6 (10.0) | 0.565 |
| Operative Time (minutes), mean ± SD | 87.4 ± 28.6 | 91.2 ± 31.4 | 0.456 |
| Surgical Approach, n (%) | | | |
| Open | 34 (56.7) | 36 (60.0) | 0.721 |
| Laparoscopic | 26 (43.3) | 24 (40.0) | |
| Intraoperative Blood Loss (ml) | 142.3 ± 89.7 | 156.8 ± 94.2 | 0.378 |
| Anesthesia Duration (minutes) | 102.5 ± 32.1 | 107.8 ± 35.6 | 0.378 |

**Table 3: Postoperative Complications and Clinical Outcomes**

| Outcome Parameters | Early Feeding Group (n=60) | Traditional Feeding Group (n=60) | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Overall Complications, n (%) | 8 (13.3) | 18 (30.0) | 0.032* |
| Wound Infection, n (%) | 3 (5.0) | 8 (13.3) | 0.125 |

| Outcome Parameters | Early Feeding Group (n=60) | Traditional Feeding Group (n=60) | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Anastomotic Leak, n (%) | 1 (1.7) | 2 (3.3) | 0.558 |
| Pneumonia, n (%) | 2 (3.3) | 6 (10.0) | 0.148 |
| Ileus, n (%) | 2 (3.3) | 8 (13.3) | 0.049* |
| Nausea/Vomiting, n (%) | 12 (20.0) | 22 (36.7) | 0.046* |
| Abdominal Distension, n (%) | 6 (10.0) | 14 (23.3) | 0.058 |
| Readmission, n (%) | 2 (3.3) | 5 (8.3) | 0.245 |
| Mortality, n (%) | 0 (0.0) | 1 (1.7) | 0.316 |

**Table 4: Length of Hospital Stay and Recovery Parameters**

| Recovery Parameters | Early Feeding Group (n=60) | Traditional Feeding Group (n=60) | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Length of Hospital Stay (days), mean ± SD | 4.2 ± 1.8 | 6.8 ± 2.4 | <0.001* |
| Time to First Bowel Movement (hours) | 18.6 ± 8.4 | 32.4 ± 12.6 | <0.001* |
| Time to First Flatus (hours) | 14.2 ± 6.8 | 28.8 ± 10.2 | <0.001* |
| Time to Ambulation (hours) | 12.4 ± 4.2 | 24.6 ± 8.4 | <0.001* |
| Pain Score (VAS) Day 1 | 3.8 ± 1.2 | 4.6 ± 1.4 | 0.002* |
| Pain Score (VAS) Day 3 | 2.4 ± 0.8 | 3.2 ± 1.1 | <0.001* |
| Return to Normal Activity (days) | 8.6 ± 2.4 | 12.4 ± 3.2 | <0.001* |

**Table 5: Laboratory Parameters and Nutritional Status**

| Laboratory Parameters | Early Feeding Group (n=60) | Traditional Feeding Group (n=60) | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hemoglobin (g/dl) | | | |
| Postoperative Day 1 | 10.8 ± 1.4 | 10.2 ± 1.6 | 0.034* |
| Postoperative Day 3 | 11.2 ± 1.2 | 10.6 ± 1.4 | 0.019* |
| Postoperative Day 7 | 11.6 ± 1.1 | 11.0 ± 1.3 | 0.012* |
| Total Protein (g/dl) | | | |
| Postoperative Day 1 | 6.4 ± 0.8 | 5.8 ± 0.9 | 0.001* |
| Postoperative Day 3 | 6.8 ± 0.7 | 6.2 ± 0.8 | <0.001* |
| Postoperative Day 7 | 7.2 ± 0.6 | 6.6 ± 0.7 | <0.001* |
| Albumin (g/dl) | | | |
| Postoperative Day 1 | 3.2 ± 0.4 | 2.8 ± 0.5 | <0.001* |
| Postoperative Day 3 | 3.6 ± 0.3 | 3.1 ± 0.4 | <0.001* |
| Postoperative Day 7 | 3.8 ± 0.3 | 3.4 ± 0.4 | <0.001* |
| White Blood Cell Count (×10³/μl) | | | |
| Postoperative Day 1 | 9.4 ± 2.2 | 11.2 ± 2.8 | 0.001* |
| Postoperative Day 3 | 7.8 ± 1.8 | 9.6 ± 2.4 | <0.001* |

**Table 6: Patient Satisfaction and Quality of Life Measures**

| Satisfaction Parameters | Early Feeding Group (n=60) | Traditional Feeding Group (n=60) | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Overall Satisfaction Score (1-10) | 8.4 ± 1.2 | 6.8 ± 1.6 | <0.001* |
| Satisfaction with Feeding Protocol (1-10) | 8.6 ± 1.1 | 5.2 ± 1.8 | <0.001* |
| Comfort Level (1-10) | 7.8 ± 1.4 | 6.2 ± 1.7 | <0.001* |
| Would Recommend to Others, n (%) | 54 (90.0) | 38 (63.3) | <0.001* |
| Return to Work (days) | 10.2 ± 3.1 | 15.6 ± 4.2 | <0.001* |
| Quality of Life Score (SF-36) | | | |
| Physical Component | 72.4 ± 8.6 | 58.2 ± 9.4 | <0.001* |
| Mental Component | 74.8 ± 7.2 | 62.6 ± 8.8 | <0.001* |
| Hospital Cost (INR) | 8,420 ± 1,240 | 12,680 ± 1,860 | <0.001* |

*p<0.05 considered statistically significant

## Discussion

The results of this randomized controlled trial demonstrate significant advantages of early postoperative feeding compared to traditional feeding protocols in patients undergoing abdominal surgery. The overall complication rate was substantially lower in the early feeding group (13.3%) compared to the traditional feeding group (30.0%), with a statistically significant difference (p=0.032). This finding is consistent with previous research by Mullen et al. (2010), who reported a 40% reduction in postoperative complications when early feeding protocols were implemented in colorectal surgery patients. The reduced complication rate in our study can be attributed to the preservation of gut barrier function and maintenance of immune competence through early nutritional support (Hur et al., 2011).

Specific complications showed notable differences between the groups. The incidence of postoperative ileus was significantly lower in the early feeding group (3.3% vs. 13.3%, p=0.049), supporting the theoretical framework that early feeding stimulates gastrointestinal motility and prevents prolonged intestinal dysfunction. This finding aligns with the work of Zhuang et al. (2009), who demonstrated that early enteral nutrition significantly reduced the incidence of postoperative ileus in patients undergoing major abdominal surgery. The physiological basis for this benefit lies in the stimulation of gut hormones and the maintenance of normal intestinal flora through early nutritional intervention (Marik & Zaloga, 2001).

The significantly reduced incidence of nausea and vomiting in the early feeding group (20.0% vs. 36.7%, p=0.046) contradicts traditional concerns about early feeding causing increased gastrointestinal distress. This finding is supported by research from Pragatheeswarane et al. (2008), who reported that patients receiving early feeding actually experienced less nausea and vomiting compared to those on traditional nil-by-mouth protocols. The improved tolerance of early feeding may be related to the maintenance of normal gastric pH and the prevention of gastric stasis that occurs with prolonged fasting.

The most striking finding of this study was the significant reduction in length of hospital stay in the early feeding group (4.2 ± 1.8 days vs. 6.8 ± 2.4 days, p<0.001). This 2.6-day reduction represents a 38% decrease in hospital stay, which has substantial implications for healthcare costs and patient satisfaction. Similar findings were reported by Mahla et al. (2006), who observed a mean reduction of 2.2 days in hospital stay when early feeding protocols were implemented in general surgery patients. The reduced hospital stay in our study can be attributed to faster recovery of gastrointestinal function and reduced complication rates.

The time to first bowel movement was significantly shorter in the early feeding group (18.6 ± 8.4 hours vs. 32.4 ± 12.6 hours, p<0.001), indicating faster restoration of normal gastrointestinal

function. This finding is consistent with the work of Binderow et al. (1994), who demonstrated that early feeding accelerated the return of normal bowel function in patients undergoing colorectal surgery. The mechanism underlying this benefit involves the stimulation of gastrointestinal motility through the release of incretin hormones and the maintenance of normal gut microbiota composition (Kehlet & Wilmore, 2002).

Pain scores were consistently lower in the early feeding group throughout the postoperative period, with statistically significant differences observed on postoperative days 1 and 3. This finding challenges the traditional belief that early feeding may increase abdominal discomfort and suggests that early nutrition may have analgesic properties. Research by Noblett et al. (2006) supports this finding, reporting reduced pain scores in patients receiving early postoperative nutrition. The analgesic effect of early feeding may be related to the maintenance of normal metabolic processes and the prevention of stress-induced hyperalgesia.

The laboratory parameters revealed significantly better maintenance of nutritional status in the early feeding group. Hemoglobin levels were consistently higher in the early feeding group throughout the postoperative period, suggesting better preservation of oxygen-carrying capacity and reduced risk of postoperative anemia. This finding is supported by the work of Gianotti et al. (2007), who demonstrated that early enteral nutrition helped maintain hemoglobin levels and reduced the need for blood transfusions in surgical patients.

Total protein and albumin levels showed remarkable differences between the groups, with the early feeding group maintaining significantly higher levels throughout the study period. The preservation of serum albumin levels in the early feeding group ($3.8 \pm 0.3$ g/dl vs. $3.4 \pm 0.4$ g/dl on postoperative day 7, $p<0.001$) indicates better protein synthesis and nutritional status. This finding aligns with research by Correia & Waitzberg (2003), who reported that early nutritional intervention helped maintain serum protein levels and reduced the incidence of protein-energy malnutrition in surgical patients.

The white blood cell count showed interesting patterns, with the early feeding group maintaining lower counts throughout the postoperative period, suggesting reduced inflammatory response and better immune function. This finding is consistent with the work of Mochizuki et al. (2000), who demonstrated that early enteral nutrition modulated the inflammatory response and improved immune function in critically ill patients.

Patient satisfaction scores were significantly higher in the early feeding group across all measured parameters. The overall satisfaction score was substantially higher ($8.4 \pm 1.2$ vs. $6.8 \pm 1.6$, $p<0.001$), indicating better patient experience with early feeding protocols. This finding is supported by research from Senkal et al. (1999), who reported improved patient satisfaction when early feeding protocols were implemented in surgical patients.

The quality of life measures using the SF-36 questionnaire showed significant improvements in both physical and mental components in the early feeding group. The physical component score ($72.4 \pm 8.6$ vs. $58.2 \pm 9.4$, $p<0.001$) and mental component score ($74.8 \pm 7.2$ vs. $62.6 \pm 8.8$, $p<0.001$) were both significantly higher, indicating better overall well-being and functional status. This finding is consistent with the work of Braga et al. (2002), who demonstrated that early nutritional intervention improved quality of life outcomes in surgical patients.

The significant reduction in hospital costs (INR $8,420 \pm 1,240$ vs. INR $12,680 \pm 1,860$, $p<0.001$) represents a 33% cost savings, which has important implications for healthcare economics. The cost reduction is primarily attributed to shorter hospital stays and reduced complication rates, supporting the economic benefits of early feeding protocols reported by Chatterjee et al. (2007).

## Conclusion

This randomized controlled trial provides compelling evidence that early postoperative feeding is superior to traditional feeding protocols in patients undergoing abdominal surgery. The study demonstrated significant reductions in postoperative complications, hospital stay duration, and healthcare costs, while improving patient satisfaction and quality of life measures. The early feeding group showed faster recovery of gastrointestinal function, better maintenance of nutritional status,

and reduced inflammatory response. These findings support the implementation of early feeding protocols as a standard of care in postoperative management, moving away from the traditional nil-by-mouth approach. The results are particularly relevant for Indian healthcare settings, where cost-effectiveness and patient satisfaction are crucial considerations in surgical care delivery.

**Recommendations**

Healthcare institutions should consider implementing early postoperative feeding protocols as part of their standard surgical care pathways, supported by appropriate staff training and patient education programs. Surgical teams should develop standardized protocols for early feeding initiation, including clear criteria for patient selection and monitoring procedures to ensure safe implementation. Further research should focus on optimizing feeding protocols for specific surgical procedures and patient populations, while investigating the long-term benefits of early feeding on surgical outcomes.

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