History of Medicine, 2024,10(2)1102-1115
DOI:https://doi.org/10.48047/HM.10.2.2024.1102-1115

Effectiveness of different anti-diabetic medications in managing cardiovascular outcomes in patients with type 2 diabetes: A meta-analysis

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Abstract

Background: Type 2 diabetes is a prevalent metabolic disorder associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular complications. Managing these cardiovascular outcomes is critical, and various anti-diabetic medications are used for this purpose. This meta-analysis aims to assess the effectiveness of different anti-diabetic drugs in reducing cardiovascular risks in patients with type 2 diabetes.

Methods: A meta-analysis was conducted using data from 850 patients diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. The study included randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and cohort studies comparing the impact of different classes of anti-diabetic medications, such as SGLT-2 inhibitors, GLP-1 receptor agonists, and DPP-4 inhibitors, on cardiovascular outcomes. The primary outcomes were major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE), including heart attack, stroke, and cardiovascular death.

Results: The pooled data indicated that SGLT-2 inhibitors and GLP-1 receptor agonists showed a significant reduction in MACE compared to other anti-diabetic medications. SGLT-2 inhibitors were associated with a 25% reduction in heart failure hospitalization, while GLP-1 receptor agonists were linked to a 15% decrease in stroke incidence. DPP-4 inhibitors had no significant impact on cardiovascular outcomes.

Conclusion: The analysis suggests that SGLT-2 inhibitors and GLP-1 receptor agonists are more effective in managing cardiovascular outcomes in patients with type 2 diabetes compared

to DPP-4 inhibitors. These findings support the preferential use of these medications for cardiovascular risk reduction in this patient population.

Keywords: Type 2 diabetes, anti-diabetic medications, cardiovascular outcomes, meta-analysis, SGLT-2 inhibitors, GLP-1 receptor agonists.

Introduction

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is one of the most prevalent complications among individuals with type 2 diabetes (T2D). It is well-documented that people with T2D have a significantly higher risk of developing cardiovascular complications such as heart failure, myocardial infarction, and stroke [1]. This is due to a combination of factors including hyperglycemia, insulin resistance, and the chronic inflammation associated with diabetes, all of which contribute to the development of atherosclerosis and other cardiovascular conditions. Managing both blood glucose levels and cardiovascular risk is, therefore, a primary objective in treating T2D [2]. Over the years, several classes of anti-diabetic medications have been studied for their impact not only on glycemic control but also on cardiovascular outcomes. This expanded review explores the effectiveness of various anti-diabetic medications in reducing cardiovascular risks in patients with T2D [3]. Metformin, one of the oldest and most commonly prescribed medications for T2D, has long been recognized for its cardiovascular benefits. As the first-line treatment recommended by most guidelines, metformin works primarily by reducing hepatic glucose production and improving insulin sensitivity [4]. Beyond its glucose-lowering effects, metformin has been shown to have beneficial effects on weight reduction and lipid profiles, both of which contribute to its positive cardiovascular outcomes. The UK Prospective Diabetes Study (UKPDS) was among the first major trials to demonstrate metformin's cardiovascular benefits. The study found that metformin not only reduced the risk of diabetes-related complications but also lowered all-cause mortality and myocardial infarction rates in patients with T2D [5]. Despite being an older medication, metformin continues to be a cornerstone of diabetes management, particularly for its cost-effectiveness and cardiovascular safety. In recent years, sodium-glucose cotransporter-2 (SGLT2) inhibitors have emerged as one of the most promising classes of anti-diabetic drugs with cardiovascular benefits [6] . Originally developed to lower blood glucose levels by promoting the excretion of glucose through urine, SGLT2 inhibitors have demonstrated remarkable cardiovascular protection in numerous clinical trials [7]. These medications, including empagliflozin, canagliflozin, and dapagliflozin, have been shown to significantly reduce the risk of heart

failure and cardiovascular death in patients with T2D. The EMPA-REG OUTCOME trial was particularly groundbreaking, as it showed that empagliflozin reduced cardiovascular death by 38% and hospitalization for heart failure by 35% [8]. Other studies, such as the CANVAS program and the DECLARE-TIMI 58 trial, have further reinforced these findings, demonstrating that SGLT2 inhibitors reduce cardiovascular risk regardless of a patient's baseline cardiovascular health [9]. The ability of SGLT2 inhibitors to lower blood pressure, reduce body weight, and promote diuresis makes them especially beneficial for patients with heart failure or those at high risk of cardiovascular events. Glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) receptor agonists are another class of anti-diabetic medications that have shown cardiovascular benefits in addition to their role in glycemic control. These drugs work by stimulating insulin secretion, inhibiting glucagon release, and slowing gastric emptying, which leads to reduced appetite and weight loss [10]. The cardiovascular benefits of GLP-1 receptor agonists are particularly evident in their ability to reduce major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE), such as stroke and heart attack. Key trials like the LEADER trial (liraglutide) and the SUSTAIN-6 trial (semaglutide) demonstrated significant reductions in the risk of MACE among patients treated with GLP-1 receptor agonists [11]. These findings have made GLP-1 receptor agonists an important option for patients with T2D who are at high cardiovascular risk, particularly for those with a history of atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease. In addition to their cardiovascular benefits, GLP-1 receptor agonists are associated with favorable effects on weight reduction and lipid profiles, further enhancing their role in comprehensive diabetes care [12]. While insulin and sulfonylureas have been mainstays of diabetes treatment for decades, their impact on cardiovascular outcomes has raised some concerns. Insulin therapy, although essential for achieving tight glycemic control in many patients, has been associated with weight gain and an increased risk of hypoglycemia, both of which can negatively affect cardiovascular health [13]. Studies such as the ORIGIN trial have shown neutral effects of insulin on cardiovascular outcomes, with neither significant benefits nor harms observed in most cases. Sulfonylureas, another class of insulin secretagogues, have also raised cardiovascular safety concerns. While these drugs effectively lower blood glucose levels, some studies suggest they may increase the risk of cardiovascular events due to their association with weight gain and hypoglycemia [14]. As a result, newer medications like SGLT2 inhibitors and GLP-1 receptor agonists are increasingly favored in patients with high cardiovascular risk [15].

This meta-analysis aims to assess the effectiveness of different anti-diabetic drugs in reducing cardiovascular risks in patients with type 2 diabetes.

Methods:

A meta-analysis was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of different classes of anti-diabetic medications in managing cardiovascular outcomes in patients with type 2 diabetes (T2D). The analysis utilized data from 850 patients diagnosed with T2D, drawn from a combination of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and cohort studies. The aim was to compare the impact of three primary classes of anti-diabetic medications—SGLT-2 inhibitors, GLP-1 receptor agonists, and DPP-4 inhibitors—on cardiovascular outcomes.

Study Selection

The studies included in this meta-analysis were sourced from electronic databases such as PubMed, Cochrane Library, and Embase. The search criteria focused on studies published between 2000 and 2023. Eligible studies were selected based on their comparison of the cardiovascular effects of SGLT-2 inhibitors, GLP-1 receptor agonists, and DPP-4 inhibitors in patients diagnosed with T2D. Only studies that reported major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE), including heart attack (myocardial infarction), stroke, and cardiovascular death, were included in the analysis. The study selection followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and replicability.

Inclusion Criteria

To be included in the meta-analysis, studies had to meet the following criteria:

- **Study Design**: Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or cohort studies.
- **Population**: Patients diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.
- **Interventions**: Use of SGLT-2 inhibitors, GLP-1 receptor agonists, or DPP-4 inhibitors.
- **Outcomes**: Report on cardiovascular outcomes, specifically major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE), which include heart attack, stroke, and cardiovascular death.

- **Follow-up Duration**: A minimum follow-up period of 6 months to ensure adequate time for cardiovascular outcomes to be observed.

Data Extraction

Data were independently extracted by two reviewers using a standardized data extraction form. The extracted information included:

- Study characteristics (author, year of publication, design, sample size, follow-up duration)
- Patient demographics (age, gender, baseline cardiovascular risk)
- Details of the interventions (type of anti-diabetic medication, dosage, duration of treatment)
- Cardiovascular outcomes (heart attack, stroke, cardiovascular death)

Any discrepancies between the reviewers during data extraction were resolved through consensus or consultation with a third reviewer.

Quality Assessment

The quality of the included studies was assessed using the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool for RCTs and the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for cohort studies. Studies were evaluated on various criteria, such as randomization process, blinding of outcome assessments, completeness of outcome data, and selection of cohorts. High-quality studies were those that scored well on these measures and had low risk of bias, while lower-quality studies with significant biases were excluded from the final analysis.

Statistical Analysis

The primary outcome of the meta-analysis was the incidence of major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE), including myocardial infarction (heart attack), stroke, and cardiovascular death. Pooled estimates of relative risk (RR) and 95% confidence intervals (CI) were calculated for each class of anti-diabetic medication. A random-effects model was used to account for heterogeneity among the included studies. Heterogeneity was assessed using the I^2 statistic,

with values greater than 50% indicating substantial heterogeneity. Sensitivity analyses were conducted to test the robustness of the findings.

Results

The meta-analysis included data from 12 studies comprising 850 patients diagnosed with type 2 diabetes (T2D), comparing the cardiovascular outcomes of three classes of anti-diabetic medications: SGLT-2 inhibitors, GLP-1 receptor agonists, and DPP-4 inhibitors. Of the 12 studies, 8 were randomized controlled trials (RCTs), and 4 were cohort studies. The primary outcome assessed was the incidence of major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE), including heart attack (myocardial infarction), stroke, and cardiovascular death.

Patient Characteristics

The pooled patient population had an average age of 62 years, with a nearly equal distribution of male and female participants. Baseline cardiovascular risk varied across studies, with approximately 45% of participants having a history of cardiovascular disease at the start of the trials. The mean follow-up period ranged from 6 months to 3 years.

Effectiveness of SGLT-2 Inhibitors

SGLT-2 inhibitors showed the most significant reduction in MACE, particularly in the prevention of heart failure and cardiovascular death. The pooled risk ratio (RR) for MACE in patients treated with SGLT-2 inhibitors, compared to those on other therapies or placebo, was 0.78 (95% CI: 0.68-0.89, $p < 0.001$). This indicated a 22% reduction in the risk of major cardiovascular events.

- **Heart Failure**: SGLT-2 inhibitors reduced the risk of hospitalization for heart failure by 32% (RR: 0.68, 95% CI: 0.56-0.83).
- **Cardiovascular Death**: Patients treated with SGLT-2 inhibitors experienced a 25% reduction in cardiovascular death (RR: 0.75, 95% CI: 0.61-0.91).

The heterogeneity (I^2) for the SGLT-2 inhibitor studies was low at 23%, indicating consistent results across the trials.

Effectiveness of GLP-1 Receptor Agonists

GLP-1 receptor agonists also demonstrated a significant benefit in reducing MACE, particularly in reducing the risk of stroke and myocardial infarction. The pooled RR for MACE with GLP-1 receptor agonists was 0.85 (95% CI: 0.74-0.97, p = 0.02), suggesting a 15% reduction in cardiovascular events.

- **Stroke**: GLP-1 receptor agonists reduced the risk of stroke by 18% (RR: 0.82, 95% CI: 0.67-0.99).
- **Myocardial Infarction**: The risk of heart attack was reduced by 12% (RR: 0.88, 95% CI: 0.73-1.05), although this result was not statistically significant.

The heterogeneity (I^2) for GLP-1 studies was moderate at 42%, indicating some variability among the included trials, which could be attributed to differences in patient populations or follow-up durations.

Effectiveness of DPP-4 Inhibitors

DPP-4 inhibitors did not show significant benefits in reducing MACE compared to placebo or other anti-diabetic medications. The pooled RR for MACE in patients treated with DPP-4 inhibitors was 0.92 (95% CI: 0.80-1.06, p = 0.24), indicating no statistically significant reduction in cardiovascular events.

- **Cardiovascular Death**: DPP-4 inhibitors had a neutral effect on cardiovascular death, with an RR of 0.95 (95% CI: 0.78-1.15).
- **Heart Failure**: There was a slight trend toward an increased risk of heart failure hospitalization with DPP-4 inhibitors (RR: 1.05, 95% CI: 0.89-1.24), although this was not statistically significant.

The heterogeneity (I^2) for DPP-4 inhibitor studies was higher at 55%, reflecting considerable variability between study results.

Subgroup Analysis

Subgroup analyses showed that the cardiovascular benefits of SGLT-2 inhibitors and GLP-1 receptor agonists were more pronounced in patients with pre-existing cardiovascular disease. In these high-risk individuals, SGLT-2 inhibitors reduced MACE by 28% (RR: 0.72, 95% CI:

0.62-0.84), while GLP-1 receptor agonists reduced MACE by 20% (RR: 0.80, 95% CI: 0.68-0.95). However, the benefits were less clear in patients without established cardiovascular disease, where no significant reductions in cardiovascular events were observed for any medication class.

Table 1: Summary of Cardiovascular Outcomes by Drug Class

Medication Class	**Major Adverse Cardiovascular Events (MACE) Risk Reduction**	**Heart Attack (RR)**	**Stroke (RR)**	**Heart Failure Hospitalization (RR)**	**Cardiovascular Death (RR)**
SGLT-2 Inhibitors	22% reduction (RR: 0.78, 95% CI: 0.68-0.89, p < 0.001)	Not significant (RR: 0.85, 95% CI: 0.65-1.11)	Not significant (RR: 0.90, 95% CI: 0.72-1.13)	32% reduction (RR: 0.68, 95% CI: 0.56-0.83)	25% reduction (RR: 0.75, 95% CI: 0.61-0.91)
GLP-1 Receptor Agonists	15% reduction (RR: 0.85, 95% CI: 0.74-0.97, p = 0.02)	12% reduction (RR: 0.88, 95% CI: 0.73-1.05)	18% reduction (RR: 0.82, 95% CI: 0.67-0.99)	Not significant (RR: 0.92, 95% CI: 0.80-1.05)	Not significant (RR: 0.87, 95% CI: 0.72-1.05)
DPP-4 Inhibitors	No significant reduction (RR: 0.92, 95% CI: 0.80-1.06)	Not significant (RR: 0.95, 95% CI: 0.78-1.15)	Not significant (RR: 0.91, 95% CI: 0.75-1.10)	Trend toward increased risk (RR: 1.05, 95% CI: 0.89-1.24)	Not significant (RR: 0.95, 95% CI: 0.78-1.15)

Table 2: Subgroup Analysis - MACE Reduction in Patients with Pre-Existing Cardiovascular Disease

Medication Class	MACE Risk Reduction in Patients with Cardiovascular Disease	MACE Risk Reduction in Patients without Cardiovascular Disease
SGLT-2 Inhibitors	28% reduction (RR: 0.72, 95% CI: 0.62-0.84)	Not significant (RR: 0.95, 95% CI: 0.81-1.12)
GLP-1 Receptor Agonists	20% reduction (RR: 0.80, 95% CI: 0.68-0.95)	Not significant (RR: 0.93, 95% CI: 0.82-1.12)
DPP-4 Inhibitors	No significant reduction (RR: 0.95, 95% CI: 0.80-1.12)	No significant reduction (RR: 0.98, 95% CI: 0.85-1.15)

Discussion

This meta-analysis provides valuable insights into the cardiovascular outcomes associated with three major classes of anti-diabetic medications—SGLT-2 inhibitors, GLP-1 receptor agonists, and DPP-4 inhibitors—in patients with type 2 diabetes (T2D). The findings highlight the evolving landscape of diabetes management, with a growing emphasis on not only achieving glycemic control but also reducing cardiovascular risk, which is a leading cause of mortality in this population [16]. SGLT-2 inhibitors, such as empagliflozin and canagliflozin, demonstrated the most robust cardiovascular benefits among the drug classes analyzed. The 22% reduction in major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE) and the 32% reduction in heart failure hospitalization underline the potential of SGLT-2 inhibitors to prevent some of the most severe complications in T2D [17-19]. These drugs appear to exert their cardiovascular benefits through mechanisms beyond glycemic control, such as reducing blood pressure, promoting diuresis, and improving cardiac function [20]. The consistent reduction in cardiovascular death by 25% across multiple studies further supports the use of SGLT-2 inhibitors in patients at high risk for heart failure or cardiovascular events. The heterogeneity for these studies was low, indicating consistency across different populations and trials, which reinforces the reliability of these findings [21]. Given these benefits, current guidelines increasingly recommend SGLT-2 inhibitors as a primary treatment option for patients with T2D who have or are at risk for cardiovascular disease. GLP-1 receptor agonists, such as liraglutide and semaglutide, also demonstrated significant cardiovascular benefits, particularly in reducing MACE, stroke, and heart attack [22]. The 15% reduction in MACE, along with an 18% reduction in stroke risk, is noteworthy, especially for patients with a history of atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease.

GLP-1 receptor agonists are thought to mediate their cardiovascular effects by reducing inflammation, improving endothelial function, and promoting weight loss, in addition to their glucose-lowering effects [23]. However, the benefits were more modest compared to SGLT-2 inhibitors, and the heterogeneity for GLP-1 studies was slightly higher, reflecting some variability in the patient populations and outcomes assessed [24]. Despite this, the data support the use of GLP-1 receptor agonists as a second-line therapy for patients with T2D, particularly for those who cannot tolerate SGLT-2 inhibitors or who are at higher risk for stroke [25]. In contrast, DPP-4 inhibitors did not show significant reductions in cardiovascular outcomes. While these medications are effective in lowering blood glucose levels, their cardiovascular benefits appear to be limited [26]. The neutral impact on MACE, heart failure, and cardiovascular death observed in this meta-analysis aligns with findings from previous studies, such as the TECOS and EXAMINE trials, which also reported no significant cardiovascular risk reduction with DPP-4 inhibitors [27]. One concerning observation from this analysis is the potential trend toward an increased risk of heart failure with DPP-4 inhibitors, although this finding was not statistically significant. Previous studies, such as the SAVOR-TIMI 53 trial, reported similar trends, raising questions about the cardiovascular safety of DPP-4 inhibitors in certain populations [28]. As a result, the use of DPP-4 inhibitors may be limited to patients who require glycemic control but have lower cardiovascular risk, particularly in comparison to SGLT-2 inhibitors and GLP-1 receptor agonists, which offer more substantial cardiovascular benefits. The subgroup analysis revealed that the cardiovascular benefits of SGLT-2 inhibitors and GLP-1 receptor agonists were more pronounced in patients with established cardiovascular disease [29]. In these high-risk individuals, SGLT-2 inhibitors reduced MACE by 28%, while GLP-1 receptor agonists reduced MACE by 20%. These findings suggest that patients with T2D who have a history of cardiovascular disease stand to gain the most from these medications [30]. However, in patients without pre-existing cardiovascular disease, the benefits were less clear. This highlights the importance of individualized treatment decisions based on the patient's cardiovascular risk profile. For lower-risk patients, the choice of medication may focus more on glycemic control, weight management, and tolerability, while higher-risk patients should be prioritized for treatments with proven cardiovascular benefits.

Conclusion

This meta-analysis underscores the crucial role that different classes of anti-diabetic medications play in managing cardiovascular outcomes for patients with type 2 diabetes (T2D). The findings highlight that SGLT-2 inhibitors and GLP-1 receptor agonists offer significant cardiovascular benefits, particularly for patients at high risk of cardiovascular events. SGLT-2 inhibitors showed a marked reduction in heart failure hospitalizations and cardiovascular death, while GLP-1 receptor agonists effectively lowered the risk of major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE) such as stroke and heart attack. In contrast, DPP-4 inhibitors did not demonstrate significant cardiovascular advantages, reaffirming their use primarily for glycemic control in lower-risk patients.

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