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Type 2 Diabetes: Is Surgery the Cure?

About 20 years ago, I attended a conference on obesity convened by the National Institutes of Health. Every weight loss expert who was anybody was there and every approach to weight loss was discussed. The conclusion of the ending panel discussion was that while the concept for weight loss is simple, it's not easy to sustain weight loss. At that point, a physician summarized the conference something like this: "What you're saying is that after all the data presented this week, bariatric surgery is the most successful way to lose weight and maintain it?" It didn't really require an answer. You probably guessed he was a bariatric surgeon.

Move forward 20 years. Bariatric surgery is now promoted as a cure for type 2 diabetes as well as weight loss. In a recent study, researchers followed 60 subjects for up to three years: 20 got the [Roux-en-Y](#) procedure, 20 got [lap-band surgery](#), and another 20 had a lifestyle-only intervention, learning to eat less and exercise. The lifestyle intervention continued for three years in all groups. The group that got the Roux-en-Y procedure fared the best after three years; two-thirds required no insulin or oral medication. One-third in the lap-band group required no meds, but the entire lifestyle intervention group was still on the same medications.

But here's the thing: the HbA1c of all groups was still 7.1% and their fasting blood sugars were still above 120 mg/dl after three years—much better than before the surgery, but still way above non-diabetic levels. That's not a cure. That's a holding pattern.

Understand, people who need bariatric surgery have 100 or more pounds to lose and have failed to lose weight after repeated attempts over decades. The surgery will drastically lower blood sugar in the short term. But if people don't change their lifestyle, they have merely slowed down the type 2 diabetes; they're most definitely not cured. On Saturday, I'll tell you what the cure is.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

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