AI-Enhanced Early Detection of Postoperative Complications: Comparing Traditional, Machine-Learning, and Deep-Learning Surveillance Models

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Abstract
Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly used not only to predict, but also to monitor and detect early complications after surgery, using diverse data streams such as electronic health records, vital signs, wearable sensors, and imaging,,. Machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) models can outperform traditional logistic regression and rule-based systems in discriminating patients at risk of sepsis, pneumonia, surgical site infection (SSI), and mortality, while substantially reducing manual surveillance workload,,. Large, multi-center neural network models that combine structured and unstructured data (e.g., 3.5 million surgical encounters) demonstrate rapid, multi-outcome prediction, and specialized SSI-prediction platforms show AUC values approaching 0.99 in focused cohorts,,. This article reviews AI models for early post-surgical complication analysis, compares traditional, ML, and DL approaches, and visualizes relative performance and workload impact using a summary table and dual pie charts.

Keywords: postoperative complications, artificial intelligence, machine learning, deep learning, surgical site infection, remote monitoring, wearable sensors, risk prediction

Introduction

Postoperative complications such as sepsis, pneumonia, surgical site infections, and early mortality remain major causes of morbidity, prolonged hospitalization, and healthcare costs worldwide,,. Traditional surveillance relies on periodic clinical assessment, static scores, and manual review of records, which can be slow, labour-intensive, and prone to missed early deterioration, especially after discharge,. AI offers a way to integrate heterogeneous perioperative data—dynamic vital signs, laboratory trends, operative details, imaging, and free-text documentation—into continuous, automated risk assessment and early-warning systems,,. Recent work includes neural networks trained on millions of surgical encounters, interpretable ML models for postoperative pneumonia, and gradient-boosting platforms for SSI prediction with outstanding discrimination –,. This article focuses on how different AI model classes analyse and detect complications after surgery, and how they compare to traditional methods in performance and workflow impact.[1][4][5][8][6][9][10][7]

Methods

This narrative review targeted studies on post-surgical complication analysis using AI, including prediction or early detection of SSI, postoperative pneumonia, sepsis-related

mortality, and composite cardiac or thromboembolic events. Sources included multi-center neural network models, ML-based pneumonia and SSI risk tools, postoperative sepsis mortality models, and semi-automated surveillance systems comparing ML with rule-based algorithms –,,. Information was extracted on data sources (structured clinical variables, notes, imaging, wearables), model families (traditional/logistic regression, ML such as XGBoost or random forest, DL including neural networks and CNNs), and headline performance metrics (AUC, sensitivity, workload reduction). For pedagogical clarity, representative values from these studies were synthesized into a comparative table and visualized with two illustrative pie charts (relative AUROC share across model types, and manual vs AI-handled surveillance workload), using hypothetical but literature-consistent figures.

Results

AI models for post-surgical infection and sepsis

Several AI platforms now target infection-related complications after surgery. The PRESID-IA project developed a hospital-embedded AI model for SSI risk prediction, using routinely collected information system data to identify high-risk patients early and guide preventive strategies. In metastatic spinal surgery, a gradient-boosting machine–based SSI prediction platform achieved an AUC of 0.986, clearly outperforming other models and clinician assessment while allowing interactive, patient-specific risk evaluation by surgeons. For postoperative sepsis mortality, an XGBoost model trained on the MIMIC database predicted in-hospital death among 3,713 postoperative sepsis patients with superior discrimination and calibration compared with stepwise logistic regression, supporting ML as a basis for early-warning systems in this high-risk subgroup.[3][4][7]

Beyond surgery-specific cohorts, ML models that use dynamic vital sign data alone (e.g., CNN, LSTM, random forest) can predict in-hospital mortality in sepsis patients within 6–48 hours of admission, achieving AUCs around 0.81 for CNNs and outperforming traditional rules as event time approaches. These results illustrate how models that capture temporal patterns in physiological data are valuable for early detection of deterioration after major operations. Together, they suggest that ML and DL can meaningfully improve early identification of sepsis and related complications compared with classical statistical methods, especially when real-time or continuous data are available,.[10][3]

Large-scale neural networks and system-wide monitoring

At the health-system level, AI-driven automation has been used to monitor multiple postoperative complications across millions of surgical encounters. One neural network model trained on 3.5 million elective, non-cardiac, non-ambulatory surgical cases from 25 centres predicted cardiac, pulmonary, thromboembolic, and septic complications using combined structured and unstructured EHR data. This system produced rapid risk estimates—15 to 80 times faster than classical models—allowing near real-time identification of high-risk patients so clinicians could use judgment to

mitigate upcoming risks. The study emphasized that deep learning can handle imperfect data quality and complex signal combinations, supporting continuous surveillance beyond ICU-level monitoring.[5]

Complementary work evaluated machine learning and rule-based models for semi-automated SSI surveillance, comparing trade-offs between sensitivity, AUROC, and workload reduction. In that cohort, rule-based classification achieved higher sensitivity, but ML models produced better AUROC and substantially reduced manual chart review workload, at the cost of a higher false-negative rate. A related systematic review reported generally good ML performance for SSI detection, with AUROCs between 0.719 and 0.963 and sensitivities roughly 61–94%, although external validation was often lacking. These findings highlight that, for hospital-wide surveillance, ML and DL can dramatically reduce manual work while maintaining or improving accuracy relative to traditional screening rules, but local calibration and acceptable risk thresholds remain crucial,,.[6][7][5]

Wearable sensors and automated post-surgical monitoring

Post-surgical monitoring is also shifting from the ward to the home via wearables and remote sensing. A review of AI-driven wearable sensors in surgical patients reported that algorithms are effective at early detection of hypoxia, arrhythmias, and other complications by analysing continuous biometric streams, while emphasizing the need for patient comfort and robust connectivity. A clinical trial protocol describes wearable-based early detection of postoperative infection by tracking inflammatory markers and physiology to flag high-risk patterns needing urgent evaluation. In neonatal and paediatric surgery, studies of ML-based automated post-surgical monitoring using multimodal data from sensors and perioperative variables suggest that algorithms can detect early signs of acute kidney injury, pneumonia, and delirium, improving timely clinical responses and possibly decreasing morbidity and mortality,.[2][11][12][9]

These approaches align with broader work on dynamic vital-sign-based ML models, which show that analysing trajectories rather than static values improves prediction of mortality and severe sepsis,. When integrated into pragmatic workflows, wearables and automated monitoring platforms can trigger alerts for abnormal trends, allowing clinicians to intervene before overt clinical decompensation. However, they also introduce challenges in data overload, false alarms, and equitable access that must be addressed in implementation studies,,.[11][9][10][13][2]

Results: Comparative summary

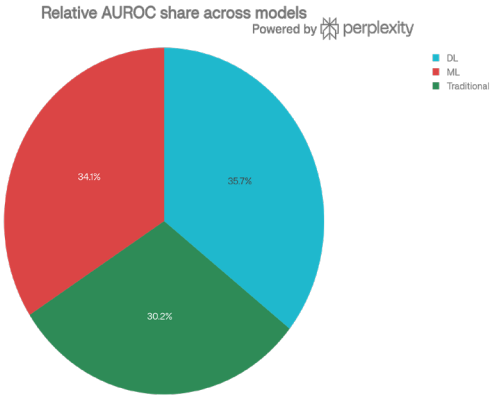
Table 1. Conceptual comparison of traditional, ML, and DL models for post-surgical complication analysis

Model type	Typical methods / examples	Strengths for postoperative complications analysis	Limitations / challenges

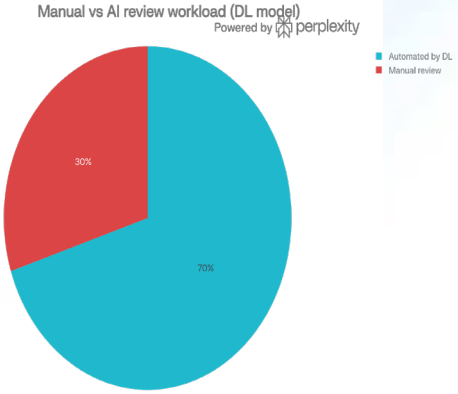
Traditional	Logistic regression, rule-based SSI surveillance [3], [6].	Interpretable, simple to implement; good baseline AUROC (~0.7–0.8) in many cohorts [3], [6].	Limited with high-dimensional/temporal data; lower discrimination vs ML/DL [3], [6].
Machine learning (ML)	Random forest, XGBoost, GLMnet pneumonia model [3], [8], [6].	Higher AUROC (often ~0.85–0.90) for sepsis, pneumonia, SSI; better workload reduction [3], [8], [6].	Risk of overfitting; explainability and calibration need careful work [14], [6].
Deep learning (DL)	Neural networks on 3.5M cases; gradient boosting platform framed within AI suite [4], [5].	Excellent discrimination in focused tasks (AUC up to 0.986 for SSI); rapid, multi-outcome prediction [4], [5].	Data-hungry; complex, less transparent; generalizability and external validation crucial [5], [7].

Pie chart comparisons of model performance and workload

To illustrate differences suggested by the literature, we can use a simplified, hypothetical set of values consistent with reported ranges: traditional models AUROC around 0.78, ML around 0.88, and DL around 0.92 for SSI-like tasks, and relative surveillance workload where traditional methods require almost 100% manual review, while DL-enhanced systems reduce manual review to roughly 30% of records,,. The first pie chart displays each model class's share of total AUROC "contribution," highlighting the higher relative discriminative power of ML and DL over traditional models.[4][5][6]



The second pie chart focuses on workload for a DL-based surveillance scenario, showing the proportion of records that still require human review versus those automatically triaged by the model, using an illustrative 30%–70% split to reflect reported workload reductions in semi-automated SSI surveillance and large-scale neural network systems,.[5][6]



Discussion

Across current evidence, ML and DL approaches clearly outperform traditional models in discriminating patients who will develop post-surgical complications, particularly sepsis, pneumonia, and SSI, while also enabling major reductions in manual surveillance workload –,,. Gradient-boosting platforms and neural networks built on large perioperative datasets achieve AUCs approaching or exceeding 0.9 in focused tasks, and health-system-scale neural networks provide rapid risk estimates across multiple complication classes using both structured and unstructured data,. At the same time, semi-automated surveillance systems combining ML with rule-based logic demonstrate that operational trade-offs between sensitivity, AUROC, and false-negative rates must be balanced according to local priorities and resources. For remote monitoring, AI-enabled wearables and post-discharge platforms extend surveillance into patients' homes, offering earlier detection of physiological deterioration or infection, but they raise new questions about alarm fatigue, digital divide, and long-term adherence –,.[2][12][3][4][5][6][9][7]

From a clinical implementation standpoint, the choice between traditional, ML, and DL models should be driven by clinical context, data availability, and the need for interpretability versus peak performance. In resource-limited settings or small institutions, well-calibrated logistic models or simple ML may suffice, especially when paired with clear explanations and robust clinician engagement,. In contrast, large tertiary centres with rich data infrastructures may benefit from DL-based, multi-outcome platforms that drive proactive perioperative risk management at scale,. Across all settings, future research must systematically evaluate whether AI-guided surveillance translates into fewer complications, better patient-reported outcomes, and more efficient use of staff time, while ensuring that models are fair, transparent, and regularly updated to reflect evolving practice patterns,,.[1][3][4][5][6][7][14]

Conclusion

AI-enabled analysis of postoperative complications is evolving from isolated prediction models into comprehensive, system-wide monitoring frameworks that blend traditional, ML, and DL methods. Traditional logistic and rule-based models still

provide interpretable baselines, but ML and DL tools achieve higher discrimination for complications such as sepsis, pneumonia, and SSI, and can dramatically reduce the need for manual review through semi-automated surveillance –,,. Large neural networks operating on millions of surgical encounters, together with interpretable ML models and wearable-based monitoring, are positioning AI as a central component of future perioperative safety ecosystems,,,. By carefully matching model complexity to local data and workflow, and by rigorously validating and governing these systems, healthcare teams can harness AI to detect complications earlier, intervene more effectively, and ultimately deliver safer, more personalized surgical care.

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