

Sugammadex Uncovered: Balancing Clinical Efficacy, Safety and Cost

Somchai Amornnyotin

Department of Anesthesiology, Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital, Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand

Abstract

Sugammadex is a selective relaxant binding agent that has fundamentally changed the reversal of neuromuscular blockade produced by the aminosteroidal neuromuscular blocking agents rocuronium and vecuronium. Unlike acetylcholinesterase inhibitors, sugammadex acts by encapsulating free molecules of these neuromuscular blocking agents in plasma, thereby reducing their availability at the neuromuscular junction and promoting diffusion of the drug away from the effect site. This unique mechanism allows rapid, predictable, and effective reversal of shallow, moderate, and deep neuromuscular blockade. Sugammadex has important practical applications in routine anesthesia, rapid-sequence induction, ambulatory surgery, patients at increased risk of postoperative pulmonary complications, and situations in which rapid restoration of neuromuscular function is desirable. Its major advantages include faster recovery compared with neostigmine, reliable reversal of deep blockade, absence of muscarinic adverse effects

requiring anticholinergic coadministration, and potentially improved operating room efficiency and postoperative recovery. However, sugammadex is not without limitations. Important concerns include its relatively high acquisition cost, risk of residual neuromuscular blockade when underdosed, hypersensitivity and anaphylaxis, marked bradycardia or cardiac arrest in rare cases, recurrence of blockade after administration of an insufficient dose, and interactions with hormonal contraceptives. Dosing should therefore be guided whenever possible by quantitative neuromuscular monitoring rather than by elapsed time or clinical signs alone. Cost-effectiveness remains context dependent. Although the drug is substantially more expensive than neostigmine on a per-dose basis, its economic value may improve when reductions in recovery time, operating room occupancy, postoperative respiratory complications, and unplanned escalation of care are considered.

Keywords: neuromuscular blockade, neuromuscular monitoring, residual paralysis, reversal, sugammadex

Introduction

Neuromuscular blocking agents (NMBAs) are essential components of modern anesthetic practice. They facilitate tracheal intubation, optimize surgical conditions, improve access to the operative field, and permit controlled ventilation. Rocuronium, a nondepolarizing aminosteroidal NMBA, is particularly widely used because of its relatively rapid onset and intermediate duration of action. However, the use of neuromuscular blockade creates an important clinical responsibility: complete recovery of neuromuscular function must be ensured before extubation and recovery from anesthesia. Residual neuromuscular blockade remains an important patient safety concern. Incomplete recovery can impair upper airway muscle function, decrease ventilatory responsiveness to hypoxemia and hypercapnia, reduce pharyngeal coordination, increase the risk of aspiration, and contribute to postoperative hypoxemia and respiratory complications. Importantly, apparent clinical recovery, such as sustained head lift or handgrip, does not reliably exclude clinically significant residual blockade. Quantitative monitoring demonstrating a train-of-four (TOF) ratio of at least 0.9 is generally considered the minimum acceptable criterion for recovery.¹⁻³

Reversal of nondepolarizing neuromuscular blockade relied primarily on acetylcholinesterase inhibitors, particularly neostigmine. Neostigmine indirectly increases acetylcholine concentrations at the neuromuscular junction, thereby competing with the NMBA for nicotinic receptors. Although effective under

appropriate circumstances, neostigmine has several important limitations. Its efficacy depends on the degree of spontaneous recovery already present, it is relatively slow and variable in onset, and excessive doses may themselves impair neuromuscular function. In addition, its muscarinic effects necessitate coadministration of an anticholinergic agent such as glycopyrrolate or atropine. The introduction of sugammadex represented a major conceptual advance in neuromuscular blockade reversal. Sugammadex directly binds rocuronium and vecuronium rather than increasing acetylcholine at the neuromuscular junction. This mechanism provides rapid and highly predictable reversal and, importantly, allows reversal of profound neuromuscular blockade.¹⁻³

Pharmacology

Sugammadex is a modified gamma-cyclodextrin specifically developed to encapsulate aminosteroidal NMBAs. Cyclodextrins are cyclic oligosaccharides with a hydrophilic outer surface and a relatively lipophilic central cavity. The molecular structure of sugammadex has been modified to increase its affinity for steroidal neuromuscular blocking molecules, especially rocuronium. Sugammadex forms a tight water-soluble complex with free rocuronium molecules. Its affinity for rocuronium is greater than that for vecuronium, which explains the particularly rapid and effective reversal observed after rocuronium. The resulting sugammadex-NMBA complex is pharmacologically inactive at the neuromuscular junction and is eliminated primarily

through renal excretion.

After intravenous administration, sugammadex rapidly binds unbound rocuronium or vecuronium molecules in plasma. The reduction in free plasma concentration creates a concentration gradient between the plasma and the neuromuscular junction. Free NMBA molecules then diffuse away from the effect site into the circulation, where they are encapsulated by additional sugammadex molecules. As the concentration of free NMBA decreases, acetylcholine can again effectively activate postsynaptic nicotinic receptors. Neuromuscular transmission subsequently recovers. This process has several clinically important implications. Sugammadex does not depend on inhibition of acetylcholinesterase. Its reversal effect is not dependent on increasing acetylcholine concentrations.¹⁻³

Practical points

The most important practical principle is that sugammadex dosing should ideally be based on the measured depth of neuromuscular blockade. Administration according to a fixed dose based only on time since rocuronium administration can result in underdosing or unnecessary drug use. Quantitative

monitoring may include acceleromyography, electromyography, kinemyography, or other validated technologies. The adductor pollicis muscle is commonly used because recovery at this site is relatively conservative and correlates with recovery of several clinically important muscle groups. The degree of blockade should be assessed before reversal: moderate blockade (TOF count 2 or more), deep blockade (post-tetanic count (PTC) 1-2 with no TOF response), and no detectable PTC (extremely profound blockade, in which routine reversal doses may be inadequate). Following reversal, quantitative monitoring should continue until the TOF ratio is at least 0.9 before tracheal extubation. The commonly used dose recommendations are summarized below. (Table 1)

The actual dose should be calculated according to the approved local product information and institutional policy. Dose selection should be individualized according to the depth of blockade rather than based solely on the intended procedure.

Moderate blockade

A dose of 2 mg/kg is commonly used when spontaneous recovery has progressed sufficiently for at least two twitches to be detected in the TOF response. Under these

Table 1 Dose recommendations of sugammadex

Depth of blockade	Findings	Common dose
Moderate	Reappearance of the second TOF twitch (T2)	2 mg/kg
Deep	PTC 1-2 with no TOF response	4 mg/kg
High-dose rocuronium	Urgent reversal shortly after administration	16 mg/kg

conditions, recovery is generally substantially faster and more predictable than after neostigmine. A practical error is to administer a lower dose simply because the patient appears clinically close to recovery. Residual blockade may still be present, and clinical tests alone are insufficiently sensitive to determine full recovery. If the depth of blockade is not objectively known, the anesthesiologist should obtain quantitative information whenever possible before choosing the dose.⁴

Deep blockade

Deep neuromuscular blockade may be intentionally maintained to optimize surgical exposure, especially in certain laparoscopic or abdominal procedures. A 4 mg/kg dose of sugammadex can provide reliable reversal when one or two post-tetanic responses are present but no TOF twitch is detectable. This capability is one of the most important advantages of sugammadex. Neostigmine is not reliable for rapid reversal of profound blockade. Therefore, when deep blockade is intentionally maintained until the end of surgery, sugammadex provides an effective strategy for restoring neuromuscular function without requiring prolonged waiting for spontaneous recovery.⁵

Immediate reversal

A dose of 16 mg/kg may be used for immediate reversal after administration of a large dose of rocuronium, such as in circumstances in which urgent restoration of neuromuscular function is required. This application may be relevant after a failed airway strategy or another unexpected clinical situation.

However, this indication should not encourage complacency during airway management. Sugammadex reverses neuromuscular blockade but does not immediately reverse anesthetic-induced unconsciousness, opioid-induced respiratory depression, airway edema, bronchospasm, aspiration, or other causes of inadequate ventilation. Furthermore, immediate reversal requires a large dose and therefore carries substantial cost implications.²

Clinical applications

Routine reversal of rocuronium

The most common clinical application is reversal of residual rocuronium-induced blockade at the end of general anesthesia. Sugammadex provides rapid recovery and is especially attractive when operating room turnover and predictable emergence are important. In routine practice, the principal advantage is not simply speed. Recovery after neostigmine may vary according to the degree of spontaneous recovery, dose administered, patient characteristics, temperature, concomitant medications, and other factors. Sugammadex generally produces more consistent reversal when administered at an appropriate dose for the measured depth of blockade.¹⁻³

Reversal of deep blockade

Sugammadex is particularly useful when deep blockade is maintained until the end of surgery. The ability to reverse from a PTC of 1-2 permits anesthesiologists to maintain profound relaxation when clinically beneficial without necessarily prolonging emergence to wait for spontaneous recovery. This application

is potentially useful in laparoscopic abdominal surgery, robotic surgery, procedures requiring an immobile surgical field, and situations where deeper relaxation may improve working conditions. Routine deep blockade should not be assumed to improve all procedures. The benefits of deep blockade should be balanced against drug requirements, monitoring needs, and cost.⁵

Rapid-sequence induction

Rocuronium is commonly used as an alternative to succinylcholine for rapid-sequence induction. The possibility of rapid reversal with sugammadex is often cited as an advantage of rocuronium. This is particularly relevant when an airway emergency occurs. Reversal of rocuronium does not replace immediate management according to a difficult airway algorithm. Restoration of spontaneous breathing may not occur quickly enough to replace emergency oxygenation strategies, particularly when the patient remains deeply anesthetized or has other causes of respiratory compromise. Thus, sugammadex should be considered a rescue option rather than a replacement for established airway management principles.⁶

Ambulatory surgery

Ambulatory surgery emphasizes rapid recovery, timely discharge, and avoidance of unplanned admission. Sugammadex is attractive in this setting. However, the higher acquisition cost is particularly relevant in high-volume ambulatory centers. Cost-effectiveness therefore depends on whether the reduction in recovery

time translates into actual operational benefit rather than merely shortening an interval that does not affect staffing or throughput.

Obese patients

Patients with obesity may have increased susceptibility to postoperative respiratory complications because of reduced functional residual capacity, obstructive sleep apnea, obesity hypoventilation, and other respiratory abnormalities. Residual neuromuscular blockade may further compromise airway and respiratory function. Dosing in patients with obesity remains an area requiring careful attention. Previous studies recommended that actual body weight-based sugammadex dosing in morbidly obese yielded faster reversal without re-curarization, irrespective of the depth of neuromuscular block or NMBA used.⁷

Patients with high respiratory risk

Patients with chronic pulmonary disease, frailty, obstructive sleep apnea, advanced age, or other risk factors for postoperative respiratory complications may be particularly vulnerable to the consequences of residual neuromuscular blockade. Potential benefits of sugammadex in these populations include faster restoration of neuromuscular function and reduced exposure to residual paralysis. Nevertheless, sugammadex does not eliminate the need for postoperative respiratory assessment. Hypoventilation may persist because of residual anesthetics, opioids, sleep-disordered breathing, pain, atelectasis, or other causes.⁸

Elderly patients

Older patients may have delayed recovery from neuromuscular blockade because of changes in pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics. They may also be more vulnerable to respiratory complications. Sugammadex can provide reliable reversal in elderly patients, although recovery may be slower than in younger adults. Quantitative monitoring remains essential because chronological age alone does not indicate the exact degree of blockade or recovery.

Pediatric patients

Sugammadex has been increasingly used in pediatric anesthesia, although approved indications, dose recommendations, and available evidence may differ according to age and country. Children may benefit from rapid reversal, but dosing should follow local regulatory guidance and pediatric evidence. As in adults, quantitative neuromuscular monitoring is desirable. Pediatric use should not be extrapolated indiscriminately from adult practice, particularly in very young infants.⁹

Renal impairment

Both sugammadex and the sugammadex-rocuronium complex are primarily eliminated through the kidneys. Therefore, severe renal impairment raises concerns regarding prolonged retention of the complex and uncertainty about long-term safety or possible recurrence. Sugammadex should be used cautiously in patients with significant renal dysfunction and in accordance with approved product information. In severe renal impairment,

alternative strategies may be appropriate depending on local recommendations.

 Advantages of sugammadex

Rapid reversal

The most obvious advantage is rapid reversal of rocuronium- and vecuronium-induced blockade. At appropriate doses, recovery to a TOF ratio of 0.9 is generally much faster than after neostigmine. Rapid recovery may be particularly valuable when surgery finishes unexpectedly early, deep blockade, need rapid emergence is clinically important, and residual paralysis poses a particularly high risk. When used appropriately with objective monitoring, sugammadex can substantially reduce the likelihood of clinically significant residual blockade.

Predictable and effective reversal

The predictability of sugammadex is arguably as clinically important as its speed. Neostigmine requires sufficient spontaneous recovery before administration and has a ceiling effect. In contrast, sugammadex directly reduces the concentration of free aminosteroidal NMBA. This pharmacological mechanism produces a more consistent relationship between appropriately selected dose and recovery. Sugammadex is uniquely useful for rapid reversal of profound rocuronium blockade.

Absence of muscarinic effects

Neostigmine increases acetylcholine at muscarinic receptors as well as nicotinic

receptors. Consequently, bradycardia, bronchial secretions, increased gastrointestinal activity, and other muscarinic effects may occur unless an anticholinergic agent is administered. Sugammadex does not share this mechanism and does not require routine coadministration of glycopyrrolate or atropine for reversal.

Improved workflow

The rapid and predictable onset of reversal may improve anesthesia workflow. Anesthesiologists may maintain adequate relaxation until the surgical procedure is complete and subsequently reverse without waiting for prolonged spontaneous recovery. The actual operational value depends on whether this time saving affects operating room throughput, staffing, or recovery unit capacity.

Disadvantages and limitations

High cost

The principal limitation of sugammadex is its substantially higher direct drug cost compared with neostigmine. In resource-limited healthcare systems, routine administration to every patient receiving rocuronium may not be economically justified. Selective use in high-risk patients or situations requiring deep or immediate reversal may therefore be more appropriate.

Limited spectrum of reversal

Sugammadex is designed to reverse aminosteroidal NMBA, principally rocuronium and vecuronium. It is highly effective but not dose independent. It does not provide equivalent reversal of benzyliisoquinolinium

agents such as cisatracurium or atracurium. The anesthetic plan should therefore consider the intended reversal strategy when selecting an NMBA.

Not a substitute for monitoring

Perhaps the most important limitation in clinical practice is behavioral rather than pharmacological. Because sugammadex is perceived as a highly reliable rescue drug, clinicians may be tempted to reduce or abandon neuromuscular monitoring. Quantitative monitoring is necessary to determine the actual depth of blockade, select the appropriate dose, confirm adequate recovery, and detect persistent or recurrent blockade.

Renal elimination

Severe renal impairment is a significant concern because of delayed elimination of both sugammadex and the sugammadex-NMBA complex. This may complicate the use of the drug in patients with advanced kidney disease.

Interference with hormonal contraception

Sugammadex may bind certain steroidal compounds, and product information includes a warning regarding possible reduction in the effectiveness of hormonal contraceptives. Women using hormonal contraception should be informed of the relevant precautions according to local prescribing information. The practical importance of this interaction is that counseling should be incorporated into perioperative care rather than being overlooked after anesthesia.¹⁰

Re-paralysis planning

After a large dose of sugammadex, subsequent administration of rocuronium or vecuronium may have an altered or delayed effect because residual circulating sugammadex can bind the newly administered NMBA. If neuromuscular blockade is required again shortly after reversal, the anesthesiologist should consider alternative agents or follow recommended timing and dosing guidance.

Adverse events and safety

Hypersensitivity and anaphylaxis

Hypersensitivity reactions, including anaphylaxis, are among the most important serious adverse events associated with sugammadex. These reactions may occur rapidly after administration and can present with hypotension, tachycardia or cardiovascular instability, bronchospasm, difficulty with ventilation, skin manifestations, and cardiovascular collapse in severe cases. Continuous observation after administration is therefore essential. Prompt recognition and treatment should follow standard perioperative anaphylaxis management principles.¹¹

Bradycardia and cardiac arrest

Marked bradycardia has been reported following sugammadex administration. Rare cases of severe bradycardia and cardiac arrest have also been described. The exact mechanism is not fully established. Practical management includes close cardiovascular monitoring immediately after administration and readiness to treat clinically significant bradycardia with

appropriate resuscitative measures. Although uncommon, this adverse event is important because sugammadex is frequently perceived as pharmacologically benign.

Recurrence blockade

Recurarization or recurrence of blockade can occur if the administered dose is inadequate for the actual depth of neuromuscular blockade. The underlying principle is straightforward, not all free or redistributing NMBA molecules may be adequately encapsulated. Risk factors may include underestimation of blockade depth, administration of too small a dose, absence of quantitative monitoring, unusual pharmacokinetics, and severe obesity. Management requires objective reassessment. Additional sugammadex may be required.

Respiratory complications

Successful reversal of neuromuscular blockade does not guarantee normal respiration. Respiratory depression may result from opioids, sedatives, volatile anesthetics, upper airway obstruction, obstructive sleep apnea, pain, or underlying pulmonary disease. A TOF ratio of at least 0.9 is therefore necessary but not sufficient for safe extubation. The patient must also demonstrate adequate consciousness, airway reflexes, ventilation, and overall readiness for recovery.

Drug interactions

Potential interactions with hormonal contraceptives require attention. In addition, the presence of residual sugammadex may affect subsequent administration of steroidal

NMBAs. Medication history should therefore be reviewed, and relevant postoperative counseling should be provided.

The choice between sugammadex and neostigmine should not be reduced to a simple question of which drug is better. For shallow or moderate blockade in low-risk patients, neostigmine remains an effective and inexpensive option when administered appropriately and guided by objective monitoring. Sugammadex provides a major advantage when rapid or deep reversal is needed or when predictability is particularly important. (Table 2)

Cost-effectiveness

Cost versus total healthcare cost

The economic debate surrounding sugammadex is complex. A comparison with

neostigmine clearly favors neostigmine because sugammadex has a substantially higher acquisition cost. However, acquisition cost is not the same as total cost. A comprehensive economic evaluation should consider operating room and anesthesia time, recovery room occupancy, staff utilization, treatment of postoperative complications, unplanned intensive care admission, delayed discharge, length of stay, and costs associated with residual neuromuscular blockade.¹²

Operating room efficiency

Operating room time is expensive, but not every reduction in emergence time produces a genuine economic saving. For example, saving ten minutes may have little financial effect if the operating room schedule has unused capacity or if the recovery room remains the

Table 2 Sugammadex versus neostigmine

	Sugammadex	Neostigmine
Mechanism	Direct encapsulation of aminosteroidal NMBA	Acetylcholinesterase inhibition
Primary targets	Rocuronium and vecuronium	Nondepolarizing blockade in general
Deep blockade reversal	Effective at appropriate dose	Limited and unreliable
Speed	Rapid	Slower and more variable
Ceiling effect	Less clinically relevant when adequately dosed	Important
Requires anticholinergic	No	Yes
Muscarinic effects	No direct mechanism	Present unless counteracted
Drug cost	High	Low
Quantitative monitoring	Essential	Essential
Major concerns	Hypersensitivity, severe bradycardia, renal elimination, cost	Bradycardia, secretions, bronchospasm, postoperative nausea and other cholinergic effects

limiting step. Conversely, in a highly utilized operating room with multiple cases, even small reductions in anesthesia-controlled time may improve throughput and reduce overtime. Thus, economic value depends heavily on local workflow.

Prevention of respiratory complications

If sugammadex, combined with quantitative monitoring, reduces clinically significant postoperative respiratory events, the avoided costs may partially offset its acquisition price. This benefit may be particularly relevant in patients with advanced age, obesity, obstructive sleep apnea, chronic respiratory disease, major abdominal or thoracic surgery, and prolonged surgery. However, a hospital that uses sugammadex without monitoring may not achieve the same safety benefit as one that combines appropriate drug selection with objective assessment.

Cost-effectiveness in high-risk patients

The value proposition of sugammadex is likely to be strongest when the clinical consequences of residual blockade are greatest. Selective use may therefore be more economically rational than universal use. Actually, sugammadex is reserved for specific indications, while neostigmine is used for appropriate low-risk patients with adequate spontaneous recovery. Examples of potentially high-value situations include deep blockade requiring reliable rapid reversal, patients at high risk of postoperative pulmonary complications, requiring immediate reversal, and patients in

which neostigmine would be less effective because of profound residual blockade. A selective evidence-based strategy may provide the best balance between patient safety and resource utilization. The greatest economic value is likely to occur when the drug replaces clinically meaningful delays or prevents expensive complications.

Special considerations

A patient may be able to open the eyes, sustain a head lift, or generate a strong handgrip despite incomplete recovery. These signs should not replace quantitative monitoring. Small-dose sugammadex may appear attractive from a cost perspective but can be dangerous if the depth of blockade is not known. Dose reduction should not be based solely on assumptions. The purpose of reversal is not merely to administer a drug. The endpoint is verified recovery. Monitoring should therefore continue until the TOF ratio reaches at least 0.9. Sugammadex reverses neuromuscular blockade only. A patient can still have respiratory depression from opioids or sedatives. Anesthesia teams should recognize that anaphylaxis and severe bradycardia, although uncommon, may occur shortly after administration. Immediate reversal with 16 mg/kg can be clinically valuable but requires a large amount of drug. Institutions should ensure appropriate availability for emergency situations while considering inventory and cost.¹³

Future perspectives

Several developments may influence the future use of sugammadex. First, implementation of quantitative neuromuscular monitoring may improve dose selection and reduce both residual paralysis and unnecessary drug administration. Second, changes in drug pricing, including the availability of lower-cost formulations in some markets, may substantially affect cost-effectiveness. Third, future studies should focus on clinically important outcomes. Relevant endpoints include postoperative pulmonary complications, reintubation, unplanned intensive care admission, recovery quality, hospital length of stay, and patient-centered outcomes. Finally, more precise identification of high-risk populations may allow targeted use.

Conclusion

Sugammadex is a major advancement in the reversal of aminosteroidal neuromuscular blockade. Its unique mechanism provides rapid, predictable, and effective reversal, including reversal from deep neuromuscular blockade. However, sugammadex is not a perfect or universally necessary replacement for conventional reversal. Its limitations include high acquisition cost, dependence on correct dose selection, restricted activity against aminosteroidal NMBA, concerns in severe renal impairment, possible interaction with hormonal contraception, and rare but potentially serious adverse events such as hypersensitivity, anaphylaxis, marked bradycardia,

and cardiac arrest. Importantly, sugammadex should be used within a strategy based on quantitative neuromuscular monitoring. The clinician should identify the depth of blockade, administer an appropriate dose, and confirm recovery to a TOF ratio of at least 0.9 before extubation. Nevertheless, cost-effectiveness should be assessed from the perspective of total perioperative care. In selected high-risk patients and situations requiring rapid or deep reversal, the clinical benefits and potential avoidance of complications may justify the additional cost.

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