

Skilled Surgeons May Improve Colon Cancer Survival by More Than Half

Patients whose surgery was performed by a very skilled surgeon saw their risk of death decrease by 70% over five years.

November 6, 2020 By [Alicia Green](#)

People with [colon cancer](#) are more likely to live longer if a highly skilled surgeon performs the surgical procedure to treat their disease, reports [Northwestern Now](#). The [study](#) was published in the journal JAMA Oncology and presented at the virtual Commission on Cancer Annual Meeting.

Researchers at Northwestern University in Illinois recruited surgeons for a video-based technical skills assessment program. Surgeons were required to submit one representative video of a surgery they performed. The video was then reviewed by 12 or more surgeons, including two colorectal surgeons with video evaluation experience.

The study included patients who underwent any surgery to treat Stage I to III colon cancer between 2012 and 2017 by surgeons identified by National Provider Identifier numbers. Overall, 609 patients underwent surgery performed by 1 of 15 participating surgeons at 11 hospitals.

Findings showed that those patients whose surgery was performed by a very skilled surgeon saw their risk of death decrease by 70% over five years compared with those with a less skilled surgeon.

“A less skilled surgeon may not remove as many lymph nodes, potentially leaving behind cancer,” suggested Brian Brajcich, MD, the study’s first author and a Northwestern surgical resident and research fellow. “Patients who would benefit from chemotherapy after surgery won’t receive it if we don’t know that the cancer has spread to the lymph node.”

According to lead author Karl Bilimoria, MD, professor of surgery at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and a Northwestern Medicine surgical oncologist, a good measure of a surgeon’s skill is the total number of similar procedures he or she has done. Bilimoria also notes that general surgeons, colorectal surgeons and surgical oncologists perform colon cancer surgery, so there may be excellent cancer surgeons in each of those fields.

Researchers also suggest that surgeons’ technical skills should be taken into account in order to improve cancer surgery outcomes. There should also be comprehensive approaches to helping

surgeons improve their skills, such as surgical coaching and assessing surgical video footage with peers and experts.

For related coverage, read "[Tackling Various Risk Factors Could Improve Cancer Surgery Outcomes.](#)"

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