

New surgery improves head and neck cancer treatment

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A new surgical procedure for head and neck cancer at the University of Alabama at Birmingham offers improved accuracy for surgeons and reduced post-operative pain for patients.

The new procedure uses robotic surgery, and results have shown it lessens the scarring, breathing problems and damage to speech that can happen with treating head and neck cancers, said William Carroll, M.D., a scientist in the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Initial tests have shown the new procedure also shortens recovery times for cancer patients.

"This application takes robotic surgery to new places in the body," said Carroll, a head and neck surgeon within UAB's Division of Otolaryngology, and one of the first surgeons to begin using the procedure for head and neck cancers.

"There is an option for patients to have a more minimally invasive surgery, and one that could effectively remove the cancer while causing fewer side effects," he said.

Robotic surgery is an alternative to traditional open surgery and a refinement on the concept of laparoscopic surgery, Carroll said. The robot most commonly used in cancer treatment is called the da Vinci, which is sold by Intuitive Surgical.

UAB was the first medical center in Alabama and among the first in the United States to begin using the da Vinci for head and neck cancers more than a year ago. Since that time, 40 UAB patients have had the new operation.

Offering the new procedure to patients first involved adapting operating techniques and robot-arm positions, and continually refining those adaptations, Carroll said. The da Vinci was originally designed for operating on the lower and middle sections of the body, not the narrow spaces inside the head and neck.

The increased surgical accuracy comes from tiny cameras attached to the end of the da Vinci instruments. Carroll said the magnified, 3-D image gives doctors a greater field of vision than conventional open or laparoscopic surgery.

This year more than 40,000 Americans will be diagnosed with head and neck cancer, and more than 7,500 will die from the disease, according to the American Cancer Society. The disease includes cancers of the oral cavity, and the larynx and pharynx.

The most effective prevention strategy remains stopping risky behaviors like smoking, chewing tobacco or drinking excessive alcohol, Carroll said.

Source: University of Alabama at Birmingham

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