

Highly-specialized, minimally-invasive surgery for lung cancer allows patient to go home sooner

October 28 2008

Minimally-invasive surgery for lung cancer called video-assisted thoracic surgery or VATS is a relatively new procedure performed almost exclusively at academic centers. Now, a preliminary study to be presented this month at the annual CHEST meeting in Philadelphia is giving surgeons an early look at its benefits.

Conventional or open surgery for lung cancer requires a six to 10-inch incision, cutting the major muscles overlying the chest. The surgeon spreads the ribs apart with a retractor in order to view and gain access to the lung, sometimes even removing a portion of one rib. With open surgery or VATS, the surgeon removes either a section of the lung or the affected lobe.

VATS is performed with two to four small incisions (the main incision is only 2 inches long). Instead of spreading the ribs, the surgeon gains access to the lungs through a space between the ribs. By inserting a small camera, the surgeon has a magnified view of the organs on a monitor in the operating room.

"Anecdotally, we've observed similar outcomes with open surgery and VATS, but we've seen a significant advantage with VATS concerning quality of life matters," says Walter Scott, M.D., a thoracic surgeon at Fox Chase Cancer Center, one of few surgeons in the country who performs this highly-specialized surgery. "Now, we have well-analyzed

comparison data that supports what we've observed in our patients."

For the study, Scott and his colleagues analyzed the records of 140 lobectomy patients who underwent VATS (74 patients) and open surgery (66 patients) for stage I non-small cell lung cancer. Five of the 74 VATS lobectomies were converted to open procedures. Operative mortality was 1/66 (1.5 percent) for open surgery and 1/74 (1.5 percent) for VATS.

"The most exciting finding is that our patients go home much sooner when they have VATS compared to open surgery," Scott says. The post-operative hospital stay was four days for VATS patients and seven days for open surgery patients (P

Citation: Highly-specialized, minimally-invasive surgery for lung cancer allows patient to go home sooner (2008, October 28) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-10-highly-specialized-minimally-invasive-surgery-lung-cancer.html>

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