

Skilled surgeons boost colon cancer survival by 70%

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Patients of more technically skilled surgeons, as assessed by review of operative video, have better long-term survival after surgery for the

treatment of colon cancer, reports a new Northwestern Medicine study.

Patients whose [surgery](#) was performed by a highly skilled surgeon had a 70 percent [lower risk](#) of dying over five years compared to patients with a lower skilled surgeon, the study found.

"This is pretty mind blowing," said lead author Dr. Karl Bilimoria, professor of surgery at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and a Northwestern Medicine [surgical oncologist](#). "The long-term effect is huge."

The paper will be published October 30 in *JAMA Oncology* and presented virtually at the Commission on Cancer Annual Meeting.

Although the importance of surgical skill has long been presumed, this is the first study, to the authors' knowledge, to demonstrate a surgeon's skill is important to long-term outcomes among patients undergoing [cancer](#) treatment surgery.

"It may seem common sense in some ways, but we didn't realize the magnitude of the effect," Bilimoria said. In a prior study the team conducted, there were 25% fewer short-term complications—such as a [colon](#) leak or bleeding—when a highly skilled surgeon performed the colon cancer operation.

Colon cancer is one of the most common cancers, with over 100,000 new cases diagnosed annually in the United States. In many cases, surgery is the primary treatment.

Bilimoria also is director of the Surgical Outcomes and Quality Improvement Center of Northwestern and a member of the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University.

One possible reason for the difference is that a skilled surgeon may be more likely to remove lymph nodes that contain colon cancer, said study first author Dr. Brian Brajcich, a Northwestern surgical resident and research fellow.

"A less skilled surgeon may not remove as many [lymph nodes](#), potentially leaving behind cancer," Brajcich said. "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."

How do you find a highly skilled cancer surgeon?

How do you find a highly skilled cancer surgeon? Ask about the number of similar procedures they have done, Bilimoria said.

"Lots of experience with the procedure is a good marker of skill," Bilimoria said. "General surgeons, colorectal surgeons and surgical oncologists all do colon cancer surgery, and there can be excellent cancer surgeons in each of those fields."

In the study, a surgeon's technical skill was scored based on review of video footage of colon surgery by other surgeons, including peers and expert reviewers. The outcomes of patients treated by surgeons with higher and lower skill scores were then compared.

Improving outcomes after surgery, especially cancer surgery, should include efforts targeting surgeons' technical skill. Comprehensive approaches to help surgeons improve their technical skill could include surgical coaching and the ability to review and discuss surgical video footage with peers and experts in the field.

Further research is needed to determine whether efforts to improve surgical skill lead to improved technical skills and patient outcomes.

Additionally, the actual methods to improve surgical skill need to be advanced and studied to determine whether they are effective at improving patient outcomes.

Bilimoria acknowledged the small study size but said, "Even in this size study, we see a large impact."

Provided by Northwestern University

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