

Health Watch -- Keyhole Colon Surgery

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A less invasive surgery for colon cancer may be successful – but only when performed by a skilled, experienced doctor.

Colon cancer is the second-leading cause of cancer death in the United States. To treat this cancer, doctors remove the cancerous portion of the colon through an 8-inch incision in the abdomen. Laparoscopic surgery – in which instruments and a tiny video camera are inserted through small slits – has not been considered effective for colon surgery. Surgeons believed laparoscopic surgery caused more side effects and complications and led to a higher rate of cancer recurrence.

But now researchers at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas say that laparoscopic surgery can be just as effective as conventional surgery for treating colon cancer. Dr. Clifford Simmang, director of UT Southwestern's colon and rectal surgery program, was recently among a group of doctors reporting the outcome of a nationwide study of laparoscopic surgery for colon cancer.

In the study, doctors compared results from open – or conventional – surgery with laparoscopic surgery. Complications and survival rates were about the same for both groups. Patients who had laparoscopic surgery spent less time in the hospital and less time on pain-relieving drugs.

Dr. Simmang says the key, though, is that the surgeon be skilled in the procedure because any mistake can cause serious problems. Look for a doctor who has performed at least 20 laparoscopic procedures. Even then, there are times when the laparoscopic procedure is not appropriate, depending on the location of the tumor.

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