Lung Cancer Surgery Is Safe for Many Patients Over 80

Mount Sinai study shows older adults can recover well and live just as long as younger patients.

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New York, NY -- Researchers at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and the Mount Sinai Tisch Cancer Center have found that adults aged 80 and older with early-stage lung cancer can safely undergo surgery and achieve outcomes comparable to younger patients, challenging longstanding assumptions about age and cancer treatment.

The findings, published in The Lancet Regional Health – Americas (10. 1016/j.lana.2026. 101428), suggest that carefully selected older adults should not be excluded from potentially curative surgical treatment based on age alone.

The study, led by Raja M. Flores, MD, Chair of the Department of Thoracic Surgery at Mount Sinai Health System; Claudia Henschke, PhD, MD, Professor of Diagnostic, Molecular and Interventional Radiology and Director of the Early Lung and Cardiac Action Program (ELCAP) at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai; and Emanuela Taioli, MD, PhD, Director of the Institute for Translational Epidemiology at the Icahn School of Medicine, examined surgical outcomes and quality of life in patients with early-stage non-small cell lung cancer, comparing those aged 80 and older with younger patients. The first authors are Rowena Yip, PhD, Associate Professor of Diagnostic, Molecular and Interventional Radiology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai; and Louis Gros, MD, Postdoc Fellow, Early Lung and Cardiac Action Program at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

“As our population ages, more patients over 80 are being diagnosed with early-stage lung cancer, yet they are often not considered for surgery,” said Dr. Flores. “Our findings show that when patients are carefully selected based on their overall health, not just their age, they can tolerate surgery well and experience excellent long-term outcomes.”

The study followed 884 patients with early-stage lung cancer, including 114 people who were age 80 or older. The researchers found that older patients lived just as long as younger patients after surgery. While some older patients had more complications right after surgery, most patients in both groups felt better over time, and their quality of life improved within a year.

“Our study highlights the importance of making sure all patients are evaluated based on their overall health, not just their age,” said Dr. Taioli. “We must ensure that effective treatments are available to everyone who can benefit from them. Older adults are often left out of clinical decisions, but our findings show they should have equal access to care that can improve survival and quality of life.”

As people live longer, more adults over 80 are being diagnosed with lung cancer. However, many are not offered surgery because of their age.

“We should treat the whole person, not just the number of years they have lived,” Dr. Flores said. “If a patient is strong enough, surgery can save their life.”

For patients and families, the message is clear: even if you are over 80, you may still be able to safely have surgery and be cured. For doctors, the study is a reminder to focus on how healthy a patient is overall and not rule out surgery based solely on age.

“Early detection and thoughtful treatment go hand in hand,” said Dr. Henschke. “When lung cancer is found at an early stage, patients (even those over 80) can benefit from treatments that offer a real chance at a cure. This study shows that with the right approach, we can extend both life and quality of life for older adults. Additionally, screening guidelines should include patients who are over 80 years old based on these findings.”

Mount Sinai researchers who contributed to this study include Wenchao Ma, Jeffrey Zhu, Jiafang Zhang, Sydney Kantor, Siyang Cai; Andrew J. Kaufman, MD; Andrea S. Wolf, MD; Ardeshir Hakami-Kermani, MD; Daniel Nicastri, MD; Dong-Seok Lee, MD; Kimberly J. Song, MD; Brian Housman, MD; and David F. Yankelevitz, MD, as part of the IELCART (Initiative for Early Lung Cancer Research on Treatment) Investigators, an international collaborative network led by researchers at Mount Sinai Health System.

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Full study and list of contributors: https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanam/article/PIIS2667-193X(26)00058-X/fulltext

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