Tackling Various Risk Factors Could Improve Cancer Surgery Outcomes

Both medical and psychosocial risk factors can increase a person's likelihood of experiencing complications after cancer surgery.

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Many people with cancer undergo surgery to treat their disease. While complications from surgery will sometimes arise, a new study published in Annals of Surgical Oncology suggests that addressing both an individual's social and psychological risk factors could help reduce such outcomes, reports Johns Hopkins Medicine.

For the study, researchers recruited 142 participants (average age 65) to answer a survey prior to surgery for abdominal cancer. (The questionnaire was based on well-known terms and concepts used to measure psychosocial risk factors.)

Folks ranked their answers to nearly 20 questions on a scale of 1 to 5. Patient outcomes were then assessed 30 days after surgery using medical records to count for complications, including infections, blood clots, bleeding from surgery and stroke.

An estimated 43 percent of participants had medical risk factors before surgery that included high blood pressure, diabetes, lung disease and heart failure. (Such factors are known to increase a person's risk of having post-surgery problems.) In addition, nearly 75 percent of participants had at least one psychosocial risk factor, with smoking being the most reported followed by limited resourcefulness.

Having only one psychosocial risk factor was not associated with post–cancer surgery complications. But a person with medical risk factors plus one psychosocial risk factor was 28 percent more likely than an individual without any of those factors to develop complications.

Compared with those with no risk factors, people with a medical risk factor and two or more psychosocial risk factors were more than three times more likely to experience difficulties following cancer surgery.

"When it comes to cancer surgery, the conventional strategy has always been to treat cancer as fast as you can," said Ira Leeds, MD, MBA, a research fellow in the Department of Surgery at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore.

He continued, “But our study suggests that there are things related to their psychological lives that we could and should be managing ahead of time and that would help our patients have better outcomes after their surgery.”

Researchers believe that focusing on social and psychosocial factors, such as patient resourcefulness, state of mind and addiction history, could potentially improve cancer surgery outcomes in the future.

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