



# Cancer Surgery during the Pandemic

by Anthony Dofitas, MD

Finding out that you or a loved one you know has the “c” is a very heavy feeling with a mixed bag of emotions. The fear and anxiety of the unknown, as well as uncertainty with regards to the future is already overwhelming, to top it off, we are still in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic.

But there is a silver lining to all of this. As we learn more about COVID-19, we slowly but surely realize that undergoing cancer surgery at this point in time is not only safe but beneficial. Here are a few points why:

**1. Most hospitals require a COVID-19 RT PCR swab test**

COVID-19 RT PCR swab test is the current gold standard in detecting COVID-19 infection. Though it still varies from region to region, most established cancer centers require all patients that are undergoing surgery to have a negative COVID-19 RT PCR swab test. This helps reduce the chance that a patient coming in for an operation has COVID and spreads it to the staff, the room, and other patients.

**2. Healthcare workers are being screened and tested**

Hospitals have learnt and improved policies with regards to infection control. Staff are checked regularly for signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and since more testing centers are available now, it is easier to test staff that exhibit symptoms.

**3. Supply for Personal Protective Equipment has caught up**

Before, during the start of the pandemic, we had worldwide shortages of PPE and other medical supplies, which led to compromise in the health care. Right now, there is still limited supply, but most well established hospitals are operating at acceptable levels of safety already.

**4. Cancer Surgery methods and techniques have been modified for COVID-19**

Much research has been done during this pandemic to optimize patient safety during the operation. Use on non-aerosolizing devices, or opting for open surgery instead of laparoscopic surgery, or even deciding to do regional anesthesia have been some considerations that improve the safety of cancer surgery during the pandemic.

**5. Delay of cancer surgery leads to potential risk**

Current studies about cancer right now have emphasized the dangers of delaying cancer surgery. A recent scientific article published in UK recently also noted there is increased risk for death even with just a 4 week delay in treatment.

Overall, the position of the Surgical Oncology Society of the Philippines states that it is safe to do cancer surgery during then pandemic and that delays will only generate more harm for the patient. Hopefully, in the future, once the pandemic is under control, the fears of cancer surgery patients will be allayed.

Don't hesitate to talk to your friendly neighborhood Surgical Oncologist. We will listen.

Thank you and Keep Safe!