PROJECT INFORMATION

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Testing Whether Providing Older Patients with a List of Questions to Ask Their Surgeons Improves Decision Making and Well-Being

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Organization

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What was the research about?

Many patients need surgery to treat cancer or heart problems. For patients ages 60 and older, surgery has an increased risk of a long hospital stay, a nursing home stay, or life not going back to normal. When deciding on surgery, patients may not ask their doctors about all the trade-offs that matter to them. As a result, patients can be unprepared for what life is like after surgery.

In this study, the research team wanted to learn whether having a list of questions to ask the surgeon helped improve discussions and decisions about surgery. The team compared older patients who received the list with patients who didn't.

What were the results?

Patients who did and didn't receive the list were the same or similar in

- The number or type of questions they asked surgeons
- How confident they felt when talking with surgeons
- How well they felt physically and mentally after treatment
- Feelings of regret about the treatment received

Who was in the study?

The research team recruited 446 patients ages 60 and older who were thinking about surgery for cancer or heart problems. Patients were receiving care from one of 40 surgeons working at five hospitals across the United States. Of these patients, 83 percent were white, 9 percent were black, 3 percent were Asian, and 1 percent were another race or didn't select a race; 17 percent were Hispanic or Latino. The average age was 72, and 56 percent were men.

What did the research team do?

The research team assigned patients by chance to one of two groups based on when they saw their surgeon. In one group, patients received a brochure by mail. The brochure had 11 questions to ask a surgeon when thinking about surgery. The group also received a letter from their surgeon asking them to use the brochure during the next office visit. In the other group, patients didn't receive the brochure or letter before the visit with their surgeon.

The research team recorded patients' conversations with the surgeon to count the number and type of questions asked. After the visit, patients filled out a survey about how confident they felt during the talk. Six weeks after surgery, patients filled out a survey about how well they felt and about any feelings of regret after treatment. Patients who decided against

surgery filled out the same survey three months after enrolling in the study.

Patients who had major surgery and their family members gave input throughout the study.

What were the limits of the study?

Only about half of patients in the first group read or used the list of questions. Results may differ if more patients used the list.

Future research could look at how surgeons could improve discussions about surgery for older patients.

How can people use the results?

Doctors can use the results when considering how to help older patients make decisions about surgery.

To learn more about this project, visit www.pcori.org/Schwarze338.