

Personalized physical therapy program benefits lung cancer patients



Physical therapist Tony Kelly helps lung surgery patient Angie Fallon get back to her active lifestyle.

Each day, Hoag Hospital is helping lung surgery patients achieve a faster recovery and improved quality of life through a comprehensive physical therapy program specifically tailored to the individual.

Angie Fallon knows firsthand the many benefits of a comprehensive physical therapy program. Angie underwent state-of-the-art video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS) to remove a portion of her lung impacted by early stage lung cancer. And although the minimally invasive procedure provides many benefits to patients, it's still a major operation. *(For more about VATS, see article at right.)*

In general, lung surgery can reduce chest wall mobility causing shortness of breath, pain and decreased shoulder range of motion. Other common side effects include lack of energy and muscle weakness.

The good news is physical therapy has proven benefits in helping patients quickly overcome the uncomfortable side effects associated with lung surgery, and to regain strength and range of motion, leading to a quicker return to daily activities and improved quality of life.

"Pulmonary rehabilitation has emerged as a recommended standard of care for patients with chronic lung disease based on a growing body of scientific evidence," asserts thoracic surgeon Richard Fischel, M.D., medical director of thoracic oncology at Hoag Cancer Center. "Studies show that patients who participate in pulmonary rehabilitation recover more quickly than their counterparts, and enjoy the highest possible level of independent function and quality of life."

Hoag's lung surgery physical therapy program was developed through the combined efforts of Dr. Fischel, a leading expert in minimally invasive thoracic surgery, and Hoag's Rehabilitation Services department. The comprehensive program takes a multidisciplinary approach to the care of lung surgery patients, and consists of both inpatient and outpatient services, as well as pre- and post-surgical care.

"Every patient has different needs and that's why Hoag takes a personalized approach to physical rehabilitation, not just for patients who have had lung surgery, but for all of our patients," explains physical therapist Tony Kelly.

"We provide the complete spectrum of rehabilitation services to our patients based on their unique needs," adds Anita Swigart, P.T., director of Hoag Rehabilitation Services. "By providing a comprehensive program, we are able to help increase patients' mobility, strength and energy levels both before and after surgery. We also work with cancer patients to aid in the reduction of other treatment-related side effects, such as those that occur with chemotherapy and radiation treatment."

"The benefits of physical therapy are amazing," exclaims Angie. "I was able to quickly recover from surgery and get right back into my daily routine. The program has also helped me to better cope with the side effects of chemotherapy treatment."

And Angie's experience is not unique. Studies show that cancer patients are better able to manage the side effects of chemotherapy and radiation treatments by participating in a comprehensive physical therapy program.

"Anyone facing lung surgery, or other cancer-related treatments, should definitely discuss the benefits of physical therapy with their doctor," emphasizes Angie. "I know that I couldn't have made it through all this as successfully without the support, guidance and encouragement of my physical therapist."

Video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS)

With an experienced staff of board certified cardiothoracic and thoracic surgeons, Hoag Hospital performs the second highest volume of thoracic (lung) surgeries in California. Included among those is an innovative minimally invasive technique called video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS).

Unlike standard thoracotomy (lung surgery), which requires a six to eight inch incision, VATS requires only four small incisions through which surgical instruments and a thoracoscope are placed. A camera lens at the tip of the scope feeds high-resolution images to a video monitor, providing the surgeon with a detailed, magnified view of the surgical site. A segment, lobe or entire lung can be removed during a VATS procedure, depending on the patient's condition and the extent of the cancer.

"The minimally invasive VATS technique offers clear advantages over the open-chest procedure," asserts accomplished VATS surgeon Richard Fischel, M.D., medical director of thoracic oncology at Hoag. "Traditional thoracotomy not only involves a large incision, but also requires spreading the ribs and possibly severing muscles. The VATS procedure, however, is completed through small keyhole incisions without rib spreading or muscle damage."

And because of the reduced chest wall trauma, VATS results in many benefits for lung cancer patients, including shorter hospital stays, less post-operative pain, less risk of post-operative complications and faster recovery times than those associated with traditional open thoracotomy procedures. In fact, VATS has been shown to result in cancer survival rates that are equal to, or better than, traditional open procedures, which is why it's the preferred surgical treatment for early stage non-small cell lung cancer at Hoag.