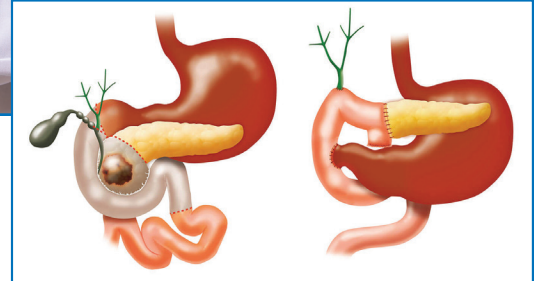


The Whipple Procedure for Pancreatic Cancer: “A Highly Complex Operation Now Performed 100% Robotically”

Shanel Bhagwandin, DO, FACS, MPH



In eight short years since recruiting an academically trained surgical oncologist to treat pancreatic cancer patients, Jupiter Medical Center's Anderson Cancer Family Institute now offers a complex surgery known as the Whipple procedure 100% robotically on select patients.

Without the need for an open incision, Dr. Shanel Bhagwandin and team access a patient's abdomen through small incisions and wrist-controlled robotic arms to remove cancerous tumors from the pancreas and then reconstruct the remaining pancreas, bile duct and portion of the intestine.

As Medical Director of the Center's Gastrointestinal Surgical Oncology program, Dr. Bhagwandin, FACS, MPH, describes the new capability as “performing a highly complex operation in a minimally invasive way.” This achievement showcases the hospital's cutting-edge technical capabilities and expertise in complex surgical interventions.

“Because the robotic surgical approach is less invasive than open abdominal surgery, patients have smaller scars, a lower risk of post-surgery hernias and infections, less blood loss and pain, fewer complications and a quicker recovery,” explains Dr. Bhagwandin, who performed the center's first 100% robotic procedures in early 2025.

“The wrist-controlled robotic surgery platform reproduces the movement of the human wrist to articulate, move and position the instruments in very difficult-to-access areas,” he says. “The da Vinci 5 robot allows for smaller, more precise movements, and when paired with a high-vision system that magnifies a 3-D view of the surgery, we get very close-up to critical structures to dissect cancerous tissue or remove lymph nodes and perform suturing with sutures as fine as human hair.”

Dr. Bhagwandin is the only board-certified, fellowship-trained surgeon in the region who is performing the Whipple procedure completely robotically.

“As a surgical oncologist, I recognize the importance of quality of life, certainly for patients with a new cancer diagnosis, and I value the trust they put in me and my team to care for them,” adds Dr. Bhagwandin.

“Pancreas cancer is a disease that carries a poor prognosis and has the potential to come back,” he explains. “Only about 20% of patients have a pancreatic tumor that can be removed with surgery, and that's

the opportunity for us to be involved early in their treatment and improve their chances of survival. With a five-year survival of only 13%, someone must be that 1-in-10 patient, and I'm fortunate we have several patients that have benefited from surgery.

“Considering the high volume of patients, we see and treat for cancer, we challenge ourselves to not only perform a safe operation,” he adds, “but also to allow patients to get back to their baseline as quickly as possible.”

Robotic surgery: key benefits

The robotic Whipple procedure can be completed in 5-6 hours, compared to about 4 hours for traditional surgery, “but the longer time in the operating room robotically translates to a faster recovery” he says.

Following surgery, Whipple patients may undergo more treatment to completely eradicate their cancer, including the possibility of chemotherapy and radiation. Pancreatic cancer is one of the most difficult to treat and is currently the third-deadliest cancer in the US. Patients are encouraged to pay attention to the vague pancreatic cancer symptoms and to visit an experienced surgeon quickly following diagnosis.

“It is especially critical to determine quickly whether that cancer is operable and can be removed,” Dr. Bhagwandin explains.

Symptoms of pancreatic cancer include:

- Jaundice
- Pain in the abdomen, upper or lower back
- Weight loss or loss of appetite
- Nausea/vomiting, bloating or feeling full, even with light eating
- Changes in bowel habits, especially diarrhea

For more information, contact Jupiter Medical Center's Anderson Family Cancer Institute at 561-263-4400.