



St. Mary's new Ion robot makes lung cancer biopsies faster, safer

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Athens, Ga. – Lung cancer is an especially difficult type of cancer to detect early, part of why it is the leading cause of cancer deaths in the U.S. and around the world. St. Mary's is now on the leading edge of faster, safer lung cancer detection with the addition of the Ion Robotic Bronchoscopy System from Intuitive, the same company that created the da Vinci surgical robot.

In partnership with Dr. Eduardo Martinez and Athens Pulmonary and Sleep Medicine (APSM), St. Mary's acquired the Ion system in November 2024. After the required period of testing and training, Dr. Martinez and Dr. Nick Fox, also of APSM, have performed 23 Ion procedures at St. Mary's, which is the first hospital in the Athens area to offer this state-of-the-art technology in the fight against cancer.



The team that performed St. Mary's first Ion lung biopsy: from left to right, Leelamma Sabu, RN; Nicole Taylor, endoscopy tech; pulmonologist Dr. Nick Fox, and Dimitrios Valvas, certified anesthesia assistant

Patients who have a suspicious lung nodule need definitive answers quickly, both for peace of mind and so that treatment for cancer can begin sooner, when it's most likely to be effective. With traditional methods, patients with a suspicious nodule may have to wait months for a follow-up CT to find out if the nodule has grown, or may need multiple biopsies, which can add more time to the patient's journey. The Ion greatly shortens the amount of time needed to reach a diagnosis.

The Ion is a minimally invasive system that reaches the lungs through the windpipe and requires no incisions. It uses ultra-thin, ultra-maneuverable tubes called catheters that can collect samples from lesions in all 18 segments of the lung with great precision. It can even collect samples from hard-to-reach lesions in the periphery of the lungs, which is where more than 70 percent of lung cancer nodules occur.

Here's how it works: A few days before the biopsy, St. Mary's team takes 3D CT scans of the patient's chest to determine the precise location of suspicious nodules. The pulmonologist then uses the Ion's computing power to map the best route through the lung's elaborate bronchial system to reach the

nodules from inside the body. During the Ion procedure, the pulmonologist is assisted by the robotic system to carefully navigate a catheter to each target nodule and collect samples for analysis. It's done under twilight anesthesia, and the patient can go home the same day.

The biopsy procedure is a follow-up for suspicious symptoms or a screening exam that uses low-dose CT imaging. If a patient has symptoms, their physician can refer them for CT testing. Patients without symptoms can also be tested without a physician referral through St. Mary's Low-Dose Lung Cancer Screening Program. This program is available at all three St. Mary's hospitals and at St. Mary's Outpatient Diagnostic Center on Daniells Bridge Road, Athens. Patients ages 50-77 years with a history of smoking can schedule a screening by calling 706-389-2700, with next-day appointments often available.

To learn more, call Athens Pulmonology at (706) 549-5560 or visit www.stmarys-health.org.

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