



## Patient's Thymoma Removed with Innovative Video-Assisted Surgery, Recovers Faster With Less Pain



Contributor: [Scott J. Swanson MD](#)

Scott J. Swanson MD, Director of Minimally Invasive Thoracic Surgery within The Lung Center at Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH).

"You have a lesion."

That's what Wallis' physician told her over the phone after reviewing a chest x-ray to investigate her persistent cough.

"I didn't know what he meant by lesion, but he told me to see a thoracic surgeon," says Wallis Urmenyhazi, PhD, a retired professor of French literature.

The thoracic surgeon told Wallis that her lesion was a thymoma, a rare disease in which a tumor grows within the thymus gland, a butterfly-shaped organ that sits in front of the

heart and makes immune cells. There are only 1.5 cases of thymoma for every million people each year in the United States.

The most common treatment is to remove the tumor with surgery. Accessing a thymoma can be challenging, however. The thymus sits behind the sternum, between the lungs, and is surrounded by sensitive blood vessels. A traditional surgery opens the chest by making a large incision in the breastplate.

Wallis had misgivings. It was a major operation with a long recovery process. Her tumor had been caught early, her only symptom was a cough. Through online research, Wallis learned that some surgical procedures approached thymomas through small incisions and used less invasive techniques aided by video or robotic technology.

“I asked my surgeon at the time if he would perform a minimally invasive procedure, but he didn’t have that expertise. He recommended the more complex traditional operation, which had no guarantee of success,” says Wallis.

Despite her reservations, Wallis scheduled the operation. She cancelled a day later, and searched online for a surgeon with experience in minimally invasive techniques for thymoma. She found a thoracic surgeon 300 miles away in Boston, Massachusetts.

That surgeon was [Scott J. Swanson MD](#), Director of Minimally Invasive Thoracic Surgery within [The Lung Center](#) at Brigham and Women’s Hospital (BWH). A member of the surgical team for Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center (DF/BWCC), Dr. Swanson is an expert in [Video-Assisted Thoracic Surgery](#) (VATS), and teaches the technique around the world.

“After meeting Wallis I recommended VATS, a minimally invasive procedure where we insert a tiny camera and instruments into small incisions in the chest. This allows us to access the thymus without opening the chest. Compared with traditional approaches, patients can expect less pain and a quicker recovery,” says Dr. Swanson.

The procedure was performed without complications. After the surgery, Wallis had no pain. It was almost as if the surgery hadn’t happened, she says.

Video-Assisted Thoracic Surgery has been available for 25 years, but not enough surgeons are trained to do it, according to Dr. Swanson. That’s why he and members of his surgical team travel to programs outside of BWH to train surgeons in minimally invasive techniques.

Dr. Swanson applauds Wallis for being an advocate for her own healthcare. "Sometimes the patient needs to seek out the physicians who are trained to perform the most cutting-edge surgical techniques," he says.

Wallis meets yearly with Dr. Swanson for follow-up scans. She says, "I will be forever grateful for Dr. Swanson."

- Dustin G.



*In this video, Scott J. Swanson, MD, Director of Minimally Invasive Thoracic Surgery at BWH, describes a minimally invasive surgical procedure to remove a thymoma.*

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