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Thyroid Surgery

The thyroid gland lies in the lower neck just above the breast bone. It controls the overall speed of the body metabolism. The thyroid occasionally requires surgery for nodules, cancer, or general enlargement.

Most cases of thyroid enlargement or over activity can be treated without surgery.

Most patients with thyroid cancer need surgery to remove all or part of the gland.

Thyroid surgery is done under general anesthesia through a small incision in the lower neck. The incision usually heals into a fine line that is difficult to see. Dissolving sutures are most often used to close the incision and require no removal.

If the entire gland is removed, the patient will need thyroid hormone pills to replace the hormone that the gland would normally make. In addition, patients with thyroid cancer may need radioactive iodine treatment following surgery. This treatment is most often done as an outpatient.

Thyroid surgery carries certain risks which are rare. They include bleeding, infection, vocal nerve injury, and parathyroid gland injury. Most patients bleed a little resulting in temporary bruising of the neck. More serious bleeding is rare. Infection is very rare in the neck. The nerves to the vocal cords are always stretched to some extent during thyroid gland removal. In most patients this causes no trouble but in about 5% of patients the voice is hoarse. In over 90% of these patients the voice returns to normal within several weeks to months. The parathyroid glands are tiny and lie behind the thyroid. They are sometimes bruised during thyroid surgery. This results in a low blood calcium level for a period of days to weeks after surgery. Very rarely the problem persists indefinitely.

Thyroid surgery normally takes about 1-2 hours and patients stay overnight at the hospital. Most are then back to their normal routine in less than a week.

Thyroid and parathyroid surgery require a delicate touch and great experience. We at Rocky Mountain Surgical Associates have performed over 1000 of these procedures. Our aim is to complete the operation using a small incision with as few complications as possible.