Frontiers in Health Informatics
ISSN-Online: 2676-7104
www.healthinformaticsjournal.com
2024; Vol 13: Issue 8
Open Access

Outcomes and Complications of Spinal Anesthesia in Laparoscopic Cholecystectomy: A Prospective Study

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Submitted on 10.10.2024, Accepted on 15.11.2024 and Published on 10.12.2024

Cite this paper as: Md. Jahangir Hossain, Mohammed Rafiqul Islam, Md. Mazharul Anwar, Mohammad Ziaur Rahman, Mohammad Salim, Md. Saiful Islam, Iftakhar Al Mamun (2024). Outcomes and Complications of Spinal Anesthesia in Laparoscopic Cholecystectomy: A Prospective Study. *Frontiers in Health Informatics*, *Vol.13, No.8*, 5849-5853

ABSTRACT

Background: Spinal anesthesia (SA) is increasingly being considered as an alternative to general anesthesia for laparoscopic cholecystectomy (LC), offering potential advantages such as reduced postoperative complications, shorter recovery time, and avoidance of endotracheal intubation. However, its widespread adoption in LC remains limited due to concerns about intraoperative complications and patient tolerance. This prospective study evaluates the clinical outcomes and complication profile of SA in patients undergoing elective LC. ***Objective:*** The primary objective was to assess the feasibility, hemodynamic stability, and perioperative complication rates of SA in LC. Secondary objectives included evaluation of intraoperative challenges (hypotension, shoulder pain, anxiety), postoperative recovery parameters, and patient outcomes. ***Methods:*** This prospective observational study employed purposive sampling to enroll 233 ASA physical status I-III patients undergoing elective LC under SA at a secondary-level urban hospital from January 2023 to December 2023. SA was performed at L1-L2 interspace using hyperbaric 0.5% bupivacaine (2.5-3.5 mL). LC was performed using the standard four-port technique with CO_2 pneumoperitoneum. Data were collected using structured proformas in MS Word and analyzed using SPSS version 23.0, with descriptive statistics for demographic variables and frequency distributions for outcome measures. ***Results:*** The study achieved a 97.4% spinal anesthesia success rate with 2.6% conversion to GA. Mean sensory blockade to T4 level occurred in 8.2±2.1 minutes. Intraoperative complications included hypotension (18.5%) and shoulder pain (22.3%), all managed successfully. Patients reported excellent pain control (mean VAS 2.1 at 2 hours) and high satisfaction (89%), with 92% discharged within 24 hours. ***Conclusion:*** This study strengthens evidence that SA is safe and effective for laparoscopic cholecystectomy when performed with modern protocols. The technique offers distinct recovery advantages while maintaining surgical conditions, warranting consideration in enhanced recovery programs.

Keywords: Bupivacaine, Laparoscopic cholecystectomy, Postoperative outcomes, Regional anesthesia, Spinal anesthesia.

INTRODUCTION

Laparoscopic cholecystectomy (LC) remains the gold standard for symptomatic cholelithiasis, with over 1.2 million procedures performed annually in the United States alone [1]. While traditionally performed under general anesthesia (GA), recent evidence suggests spinal anesthesia (SA) may offer comparable efficacy with reduced complications [2,3]. This shift reflects growing recognition of Enhanced Recovery After Surgery (ERAS) protocols emphasizing opioid-sparing techniques and rapid postoperative recovery [4]. Contemporary studies demonstrate SA's viability for LC, particularly in outpatient settings. A 2022 multicenter trial reported SA patients had 40% less postoperative nausea ($p<0.01$) and 2-hour faster discharge times compared to GA [5]. Meta-analyses confirm these findings, with SA associated with lower pain scores (MD -1.3, 95% CI -1.6 to -1.0) and reduced opioid requirements in the first 24 hours [6,7]. The 2023 ERAS Society guidelines now include SA as an option for LC in appropriate patients [8]. Technical advancements have addressed historical concerns about SA for LC. Ultrasound-guided spinal techniques improve first-attempt success rates to 94% versus 78% with landmark methods [9]. Low-dose hyperbaric bupivacaine (7.5mg) combined with fentanyl (10µg) provides adequate sensory blockade while minimizing hypotension [10]. For shoulder pain - previously reported in 15-30% of cases - prophylactic intraperitoneal lidocaine instillation reduces incidence to 8% [11]. Patient selection remains crucial. Recent scoring systems incorporating BMI, ASA status, and anxiety levels predict SA success with 89% accuracy [12]. Contraindications now include not just anatomical factors but also severe cardiopulmonary disease, where GA with controlled ventilation may be safer [13]. This study evaluates SA's outcomes using contemporary protocols in a real-world secondary hospital setting. We assess novel endpoints including time-to-full-recovery and patient-reported satisfaction metrics, addressing gaps in current literature [14]. Our standardized approach incorporates best practices from recent evidence while maintaining applicability for non-tertiary centers.

METHODOLOGY

This prospective observational study was conducted at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), Dhaka, Bangladesh from January 2023 to December 2023 after obtaining institutional ethics committee approval (Ref: IEC/2020/456). We enrolled 233 consecutive ASA I-III patients aged 18-70 years scheduled for elective laparoscopic cholecystectomy under spinal anesthesia. Exclusion criteria included BMI >35 kg/m², coagulopathy, spinal deformities, and patient refusal. All patients received standardized spinal anesthesia with 12.5mg hyperbaric bupivacaine and 25µg fentanyl at L3-L4 interspace using a 25G Quincke needle. Sensory blockade to T4 level was confirmed before surgery. Intraoperative monitoring included continuous ECG, SpO_2, non-invasive blood pressure, and end-tidal CO_2 (via nasal cannula). Hypotension (MAP <65mmHg) was treated with IV phenylephrine 50µg boluses. Shoulder pain was managed with IV fentanyl 25µg increments. The primary outcome was conversion rate to general anesthesia. Secondary outcomes included hemodynamic stability, postoperative pain scores (VAS), time to first analgesia, and patient satisfaction (5-point Likert scale). Data were collected prospectively by blinded observers and analyzed using SPSS v26.0, with $p<0.05$ considered significant. Sample size was calculated to detect a 5% conversion rate with 80% power.

RESULT

The study included 233 patients who underwent laparoscopic cholecystectomy under spinal anesthesia, with a mean age of 42.5±12.8 years and BMI of 26.4±3.2 kg/m². The cohort comprised 68% females (n=158) and 32% males (n=75), with ASA distribution of 52% ASA I (n=121), 41% ASA II (n=96), and 7% ASA III (n=16). Spinal anesthesia was successfully established in 97.4% of cases (n=227), with 6 patients (2.6%) requiring conversion to general anesthesia due to inadequate blockade (4 cases) or severe shoulder pain (2 cases). The mean time to achieve T4 sensory level was 8.2±2.1 minutes, with a mean duration of surgery of 45.3±12.4 minutes. Intraoperative complications included hypotension (SBP <90mmHg) in 18.5% (n=43), managed successfully with phenylephrine boluses, and shoulder pain in 22.3% (n=52), relieved with fentanyl supplementation. Postoperatively, mean VAS pain scores at 2, 6, and 12 hours were 2.1±1.2, 3.4±1.5, and 1.8±1.0 respectively. Time to first analgesic request averaged 142±38 minutes. Patient satisfaction was high, with 89% (n=207) rating their experience as "good" or "excellent" on the 5-point Likert scale. Mean hospital stay was 1.2±0.4 days, with 92% (n=214) discharged within 24 hours.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of study participants

Characteristic	Value
Age (years), mean ± SD	42.5 ± 12.8
BMI (kg/m²), mean ± SD	26.4 ± 3.2
Gender, n (%)	
Female	158 (68%)
Male	75 (32%)

ASA Classification, n (%)	
I	121 (52%)
II	96 (41%)
III	16 (7%)

Table 2: Intraoperative outcomes

Parameter	Value
Success rate of SA, n (%)	227 (97.4%)
Conversion to GA, n (%)	6 (2.6%)
Time to T4 level (min), mean ± SD	8.2 ± 2.1
Surgery duration (min), mean ± SD	45.3 ± 12.4
Intraoperative complications, n (%)	
Hypotension	43 (18.5%)
Shoulder pain	52 (22.3%)

Table 3: Postoperative outcomes

Outcome measure	Value
	Mean ±SD/n/%
VAS pain scores	
2 hours	2.1 ± 1.2
6 hours	3.4 ± 1.5
12 hours	1.8 ± 1.0
Time to first analgesia (min)	142 ± 38
Patient satisfaction*	
Excellent	124 (53%)
Good	83 (36%)
Neutral/Poor	26 (11%)
Hospital stays (days)	1.2 ± 0.4

*5-point Likert scale (Excellent/Good/Neutral/Poor/Very Poor)

DISCUSSION

This prospective study demonstrates that spinal anesthesia (SA) is a viable alternative to general anesthesia (GA) for laparoscopic cholecystectomy, with a 97.4% success rate and low conversion rate (2.6%) in our cohort of 233 patients. These findings align with recent multicenter trials reporting 95-98% success rates for SA in laparoscopic procedures [15], supporting its reliability when performed by experienced anesthesiologists. Our conversion rate compares favorably to the 3-5% range reported in contemporary literature [16,17], likely reflecting our stringent patient selection criteria and standardized SA protocol using low-dose hyperbaric bupivacaine (12.5mg) with fentanyl. The hemodynamic profile observed in our study (18.5% hypotension rate) improves upon earlier reports of 25-30% incidence [18], possibly due to our prophylactic fluid loading protocol and low-dose local anesthetic regimen. This supports current recommendations from the PROSPECT collaboration favoring reduced bupivacaine doses (10-12.5mg) for laparoscopic procedures [19]. Shoulder pain incidence (22.3%) was lower than traditional reports of 30-40% [20], likely benefiting from our routine intraperitoneal lidocaine instillation - an intervention recently validated by Hamid et al. [21] showing a 60% reduction in diaphragmatic irritation. Our postoperative outcomes reinforce SA's advantages in enhanced recovery pathways. The mean time to first analgesia (142 minutes) exceeds GA benchmarks by 40-60 minutes [4], while our VAS scores (2.1 at 2 hours) compare favorably to GA cohorts (typically 3.0-3.5) [6]. These findings corroborate 2023 meta-analyses demonstrating SA's superior early postoperative analgesia [22], attributed to residual spinal blockade and reduced opioid requirements. The 89% satisfaction rate mirrors recent patient-reported outcome studies [23], highlighting SA's psychological benefits from avoiding airway manipulation and early cognitive recovery. Several technical insights emerge from our experience. First, the 8.2-minute median time to T4 blockade supports using hyperbaric solutions for predictable cephalad spread [24]. Second, our 45-minute mean operative duration confirms that SA does not prolong surgery when teams adapt to awake patients [25]. Third, the 24-hour discharge rate (92%) exceeds most GA protocols (70-85%) [26], reinforcing SA's role in ambulatory surgery.

Limitations:
This single-center study lacks a GA comparison group, potentially limiting generalizability. The relatively small sample size may underpower the detection of rare complications. Additionally, the non-randomized design could introduce selection bias. Long-term outcomes and cost-effectiveness analyses were not assessed, warranting further multicenter randomized trials.

CONCLUSION

This prospective study demonstrates spinal anesthesia as a safe and effective alternative for laparoscopic cholecystectomy, with a 97.4% success rate and favorable recovery outcomes. The technique offers significant advantages in postoperative analgesia and patient satisfaction while maintaining surgical feasibility. These findings support incorporating spinal anesthesia into enhanced recovery protocols, particularly for day-case surgeries. Future randomized controlled trials should further evaluate its cost-effectiveness and long-term benefits compared to general anesthesia.

Recommendation:
We recommend spinal anesthesia as a viable option for laparoscopic cholecystectomy in ASA I-II patients, particularly in ambulatory settings. Institutions should establish standardized protocols for patient selection, anesthetic dosing, and complication management. Further research should compare cost-effectiveness and long-term outcomes between spinal and general anesthesia approaches.

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