Impact of Frailty On 5-Year Survival In Patients Older Than 70 Years Undergoing Colorectal Surgery for Cancer

Manuel Ariles-Armas

Hospital Universitario de Gran Canaria Dr Negrin

Cristina Roque-Castellano

Hospital Universitario de Gran Canaria Dr Negrin

Roberto Fariña-Castro

Hospital Universitario de Gran Canaria Dr Negrin

Alicia Conde-Martel

Hospital Universitario de Gran Canaria Dr Negrin

María Asunción Acosta-Mérida

Hospital Universitario de Gran Canaria Dr Negrin

Joaquin Marchena-Gomez (✉ joaquin.marchena@ulpgc.es)

Hospital Universitario de Gran Canaria Dr Negrin <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7362-1110>

Research

Keywords: frailty, geriatrics, colorectal cancer, comorbidity

Posted Date: February 1st, 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-178103/v1>

License: © ⓘ This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[Read Full License](#)

Version of Record: A version of this preprint was published at World Journal of Surgical Oncology on April 10th, 2021. See the published version at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12957-021-02221-6>.

Abstract

Background: Frailty has been shown to be a good predictor of post-operative complications and death in patients undergoing gastrointestinal surgery. The aim of this study was to analyse the differences between frail and non-frail patients undergoing colorectal cancer surgery, as well as the impact of frailty on long-term survival in these patients.

Methods: A cohort of 149 patients aged 70 years and older who underwent elective surgery for colorectal cancer was followed-up for at least 5 years. The sample was divided into two groups: frail and non-frail patients. The Canadian Study of Health and Aging-Clinical Frailty Scale (CSHA-CSF) was used to detect frailty. The two groups were compared with regard to demographic data, comorbidities, functional and cognitive statuses, surgical risk, surgical variables, tumour extent, and post-operative outcomes, which were mortality at 30 days, 90 days and 1 year after the procedure. Univariate and multivariate analyses were also performed to determine which of the predictive variables were related to 5-year survival.

Results: Out of the 149 patients, 96 (64.4%) were men and 53 (35.6) were women, with a median age of 75 years (IQR: 72-80). According to the CSHA-CSF scale, 59 patients (39.6%) were frail, and 90 patients (60.4%) were not frail. Frail patients were significantly older and had more impaired cognitive status, worse functional status, more comorbidities, more operative mortality, and more serious complications than non-frail patients. Comorbidities, as measured by the Charlson Comorbidity Index ($p=0.001$); the Lawton-Brody Index ($p=0.011$); failure to perform an anastomosis ($p=0.024$); nodal involvement ($p=0.005$); distant metastases ($p<0.001$); high TNM stage ($p=0.004$); and anastomosis dehiscence ($p=0.013$) were significant univariate predictors of a poor prognosis in univariate analysis. Multivariate analysis (Cox regression) of long-term survival, with adjustment for age, frailty, comorbidities and TNM stage, showed that comorbidities ($p=0.002$; HR:1.30; 95% CI:1.10–1.54) and TNM stage ($p=0.014$; HR:2.06; 95% CI:1.16-3.67) were the only independent risk factors for survival at five years.

Conclusions: Frailty is associated with poor short-term post-operative outcomes, but it does not seem to affect long-term survival in patients with colorectal cancer. Instead, comorbidities and tumour stage are good predictors of long-term survival.

Introduction

An ageing population is increasing the demand for healthcare. More than 4 million major surgical operations are performed annually in the United States on older patients, yet as an increasing number of elderly patients undergo surgery, there is a clear increase in age-related peri-operative morbidity and mortality [1]. Many of these operations are surgical procedures to treat elderly patients with colorectal cancer (CRC). In fact, colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer in the world, and surgery, with either curative or palliative intent, is the main treatment modality for this disease. Approximately 60% of CRC patients are > 70 years old at the time of diagnosis, and 43% are > 75 years of age [2].

On the other hand, the pre-operative detection of frailty is becoming more relevant in these older surgical patients. Frailty has been shown to be a good predictor of post-operative complications of major gastrointestinal procedures [3], and it has been associated with post-operative mortality across all non-cardiac surgical specialties [4]. Additionally, frailty has a detrimental impact on costs and hospital profit for elective surgery [5]. Many reports suggest that frailty screening should be included in pre-operative assessments to enhance surgical decision-making and patient counselling [6–9].

Regarding frailty in patients operated on for CRC, in a systematic review reported by Fagard et al. [10], they found only five quality articles with small numbers of patients and various definitions of frailty and post-operative outcomes, which made comparisons difficult. Recently, additional studies have been reported involving frail patients operated on for CRC, either in the elective setting [11, 12] or in the emergency setting [13], including a meta-analysis [14]. They also found that frailty is a robust predictor of severe post-operative complications in patients with colorectal cancer. However, the differences in long-term outcomes between frail and non-frail patients operated on for colorectal cancer have been less well documented. Furthermore, when assessing long-term results, in most of these studies, there is no adjustment for possible confounding factors related to the evolution of a neoplasm, such as tumour stage.

The aim of this study was to analyse the pre-, intra- and post-operative differences in characteristics between older frail and non-frail patients with CRC and to investigate the long-term prognosis of these patients after adjusting for frailty, comorbidities, and tumour stage.

Methodology

Study design and participants: An observational study was conducted in a cohort of 149 consecutive patients older than 70 years old who underwent elective colorectal surgery for cancer between January 2013 and December 2015. Data were collected prospectively by a single surgeon and recorded in a database. The setting was a tertiary hospital that is responsible for a population of approximately 400,000 people. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the hospital (Code 140195). All patients consented to participate in the study.

Method: A surgeon and an anaesthesiologist pre-operatively evaluated all patients, and a complete anamnesis and physical examination were completed. The pre-operative geriatric assessment was specifically performed by a surgeon trained in this matter (MAA). The diagnosis of CRC was made by colonoscopy and biopsy. An imaging study utilizing thoracoabdominal computed tomography was performed to determine the extent of the cancer. Laboratory tests, chest X-rays, electrocardiograms, and additional tests were also performed based on each patient's underlying condition. The anaesthesiologist did not normally refuse to administer anaesthesia if the surgeon and family had agreed to undergo the procedure despite the presence of comorbidities or disabilities that were possible contraindications.

The cohort was divided into two groups: frail patients and non-frail patients.

The Clinical Frailty Score from the Canadian Study of Health and Aging (CSHA-CFS) was used to evaluate frailty in each patient. This instrument, which was proposed by Rockwood et al. [15], is based on a numerical scale from 1 to 7 as follows: CFS 1 (very fit), CFS 2 (well), CFS 3 (well with treated comorbid disease), CFS 4 (apparently vulnerable), CFS 5 (mildly frail), CFS 6 (moderately frail), and CFS 7 (severely frail). In this study, the threshold for determining frailty was a CSHA-CFS ≥ 4 . It has been recently suggested that this cut-off is the most strictly correlated with post-operative outcome [11].

The two groups were compared with regard to demographic data, comorbidities, functional and cognitive statuses, surgical risk, surgical variables, tumour extent, and post-operative outcomes, which were mortality at 30 days, 90 days and 1 year after the procedure. All patients were followed for 5 years. Therefore, survival at five years was also recorded.

The following variables were evaluated:

Patient characteristics: Age and sex were recorded. Regarding the age cut-off point, the progressive increase in life expectancy in Western countries led us to consider it appropriate to include patients aged ≥ 70 , which is 5 years older than the World Health Organization definition of the elderly population.

Preoperative status

Charlson Comorbidity Index (ChCI): The ChCI score was calculated pre-operatively for each patient. This score includes 19 medical conditions assigned point values of 1, 2, 3, or 6, with totals ranging from 0 to 37 points. The absence of comorbidity is represented by 0 points; low levels of comorbidity are 1-2 points; moderate levels of comorbidity are 3-4 points; and high levels of comorbidity are >4 points [16]. In this study, the ChCI was not adjusted for age or for the prevalence of AIDS [17], as there were no cases of this in the study population.

ASA (American Society of Anesthesiology) Physical Status Classification System: This scale was developed to offer clinicians a simple categorization of a patient's physiological status that could be helpful in predicting operative risk [18].

Functional status: The functional status with regard to the basic activities of daily living (ADL) was determined using the Barthel Index [19]. The total score for this index ranges from 0, corresponding to a total dependence, to 100 points, corresponding to complete independence. For analytical purposes, this variable was categorized as independent (80-100 points) versus some grade of dependency (<80 points) [20].

The previous functional status with regard to the Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADL) was also evaluated using the Lawton-Brody Index [21]. In summary, the score ranges from 0 (low function, dependent) to 8 points (high function, independent) for women and from 0 to 5 for men.

Cognitive status: The Short Portable Mental State Questionnaire (SPMSQ) with the Pfeiffer test [22] was performed. This short questionnaire (10 items) provides an estimate of a patient's cognitive status

according to the number of incorrect answers to basic questions, with values ranking from 0–1 (no impairment) to 9–10 (most severe impairment). In this study, the variable was categorized into <3 errors versus ≥ 3 errors.

Body Mass Index and Mini Nutritional Assessment Short Form questionnaire (MNA-SF) [23]: The MNA-SF is a 6-item assessment tool based on the patient's body mass index (BMI), a dietary questionnaire and a subjective assessment. The maximum score is 14 points; the risk of malnutrition increases with decreasing scores.

Laboratory values: The values of haemoglobin (gr/dL), serum creatinine (mg/dL), and serum albumin (gr/dL) were recorded.

Surgical variables: The surgical variables were the use of a laparoscopic approach, the generation of an anastomosis (no/yes), and the need for at least one red blood cell unit transfusion during and/or immediately before or after the procedure (48 hours).

Cancer stage (TNM): Tumour stage according to the 8th edition of the American Joint Committee on Cancer staging system was collected and categorized as stage I-II vs stage III-IV.

Post-operative complications: Post-operative complications were graded using the Comprehensive Complication Index (CCI) [24]. This score summarizes all post-operative complications and seems to be more sensitive than other existing scales, such as the Clavien-Dindo classification [25]. The values of the index range from 0 (uneventful course) to 100 points (death).

Hospital stay: The post-operative hospital stay of each patient was collected and registered.

Mortality: Post-operative mortality, defined as any death within 30 days after the surgical procedure, 90-day mortality, and one-year mortality after surgery, was also recorded.

Long-term survival: All patients were followed for at least 5 years or until death. Their status was monitored through their medical history or telephone contact with either the patients themselves or their relatives. Long-term survival was considered as the period between the performance of the surgical procedure and death or the date of the last follow-up observation before the analysis, if the subject was still alive. The mean follow-up duration in the cohort was 5 years.

Statistical analysis

The data were analysed using the statistical package SPSS 26.0 for Windows (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, United States). Categorical variables are summarized as frequencies and percentages; continuous variables are described as the means and standard deviations (SD) when the data followed a normal distribution or as medians and interquartile ranges (IQRs) when they did not. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied to evaluate the normality of the distribution of values in continuous variables.

Univariate analysis was performed to compare the characteristics of non-frail and frail patients with regard to pre-operative features, surgical variables, tumour extent, and post-operative outcomes.

The chi-squared test or Fisher's test was used to compare categorical data. For parametric distributions, Student's t-test was used to compare the mean values of the two groups. For ordinal variables or non-parametric variables, the Mann–Whitney U-test was used to compare the median values of the response variable.

Likewise, another univariate analysis was performed to compare the survival curves based on different independent variables. The survival curves were constructed using the Kaplan-Meier method. The log-rank test was applied to compare survival at five years.

Finally, multivariate Cox proportional hazards regression analysis was conducted, with adjustment for frailty; age; comorbidities, as measured by the Charlson Comorbidity Index; and tumour stage.

Statistical significance was defined as $p < 0.05$. The hazard ratio (HR) and 95% confidence interval (95% CI) were also calculated as measurements of associations using Cox regression.

Results

Out of the 149 patients, 96 (64.4%) were men and 53 (35.6%) were women, with a median age of 75 years (IQR: 72–80). Only one patient was institutionalized. The rest of the patients lived at home with at least one relative and/or a caregiver.

According to the CSHA-CSF scale, 59 patients (39.6%) were frail, and 90 patients (60.4%) were not frail.

Pre-operative status.

Forty-seven patients (31.5%) were classified as ASA I-II, and 102 (68.5%) were classified as ASA III-IV. The median ChCI score was 3.0 (IQR: 2.0–4.0). Fourteen patients (9.4%) had a Barthel Index score < 80 points, and 135 (90.6%) had a Barthel Index score ≥ 80 points. The median value of the Lawton-Brody index score was 6.0 (IQR: 5.0–8.0). According to the Pfeiffer test, 140 patients (94%) had normal mental functioning, and 9 patients (6%) had cognitive impairment.

The mean body mass index was 26.8 kg/m^2 ($\text{SD} \pm 26.8$). The median value of the MNA-SF test was 10.0 (9.0–12.0).

The mean level of haemoglobin was 12.5 g/dL ($\text{SD} \pm 2.2$), the median level of serum creatinine was 0.96 mg/dL (IQR: 0.79–1.13), and the mean level of serum albumin was 3.8 g/dL ($\text{SD} \pm 0.5$).

Surgical variables.

The laparoscopic approach was performed in 56 procedures (38.9%), and anastomosis was carried out in 127 patients (85.2%).

Peri-operatively, 33 patients (22.1%) received at least one red blood transfusion.

Tumour extent.

In 45 patients (30.2%), the tumour did not extend past the muscularis propria layer (T1-T2), and in 104 patients (69.8%), the tumour invaded through the muscularis propria into peri-colorectal tissues or penetrated the visceral peritoneum or other organs (T3-T4). Likewise, 102 patients (68.5%) did not have lymph node involvement (N0), and 47 (31.5%) had lymph node involvement (N1). Only 7 patients (4.7%) had distant metastasis (M1).

According to the 8th edition of the American Joint Committee on Cancer Staging, 99 patients (66.4%) were classified as having TNM stage I-II disease, and 50 patients (33.6%) were classified as having stage III-IV disease.

Post-operative complications.

Seventy-eight patients (52.3%) had at least one post-operative complication, although most of them were minor. In fact, the median Comprehensive Complication Index score was only 8.7 (IQR: 0.0-24.2). Within the group of patients who had complications ($CCI \geq 1$), the median CCI score was 33.3 (IQR: 8.7–46.3). Anastomosis dehiscence was observed in 10 patients (7.9% of the patients with anastomosis).

Outcomes.

The median post-operative hospital stay was 10 days (IQR: 7–15).

The operative mortality rate (30 days) was 3.4% (5 patients). The causes of death were anastomotic dehiscence (2 patients), cardiogenic shock (1 patient), pneumonia (1 patient), and venous mesenteric ischaemia due to massive venous thrombosis (1 patient).

The 90-day mortality rate was 8.1% (12 patients), and the 1-year mortality rate was 12.8% (19 patients).

By the end of the follow-up period, 48 patients (17.6%) had died. The cumulative survival rates at 3 and 5 years were 78.4% and 68%, respectively. Out of the 43 patients who died during follow-up, 21 patients (48.8%) died due to tumour progression, and 22 patients (51.2%) died due to non-tumour-related causes.

Regarding chemotherapy, only 37 patients (24.8%) received neo- or adjuvant chemotherapy.

The results of the comparisons between frail and non-frail patients are summarized in Table 1. Frail patients were significantly older, were more likely to have impaired cognition, and had a worse functional status, more comorbidities, a higher operative mortality rate, and more serious complications than non-frail patients. However, there were no significant differences in mortality between these two groups at 90 days and one year after the surgical procedure. Furthermore, although a smaller proportion of the frail patients than the non-frail patients were alive at five years, the survival analysis did not show statistically

significant difference between the two groups. The mean survival time in frail patients was 58.9 months, whereas non-frail patients had a mean survival of 63.9 months ($p = 0.246$) (Fig. 1).

Table 1

Comparative analysis between frail and non-frail patients with CRC, according to the CSHA-CSF scale.

^aBMI: Body Mass Index; ^bMNA: Mini-Nutritional-Assessment; ^cCCI: Comprehensive Complication Index.

*Statistically significant.

	Total N (%) 149 (100)	No Frailty N (%) 90 (60.4%)	Frailty N (%) 59 (39.6%)	P
Median age (IQR)	75 (72–80)	74 (72–79)	77 (73–81)	0.008*
Gender:	96 (64.4)	61 (67.8)	35 (59.3)	0.292
Men	53 (35.6)	29 (32.2)	24 (40.7)	
Women				
ASA:	47 (31.5)	32 (35.6)	15 (25.4)	0.193
I-II	102 (68.5)	58 (64.4)	44 (74.6)	
III-IV				
Charlson Index Median (IQR)	3.0 (2.0–4.0)	2.0 (2.0–4.0)	3.0 (2.0–4.0)	0.005*
Barthel:	14 (9.4)	1 (1.1)	13 (22.0)	< 0.001*
< 80	135 (90.6)	89 (98.9)	46 (78.0)	
≥ 80				
Lawton-Brody Median (IQR)	6.0 (5.0–8.0)	7.0 (6.0–8.0)	4.0 (3.0–6.0)	< 0.001*
Pfeiffer:	140 (94.0)	89 (98.9)	51 (86.4)	0.003*
< 3	9 (6.0)	1 (1.1)	8 (13.6)	
≥ 3				
BMI ^a Mean ± SD	26.8 (± 4.0)	26.9 (± 4.2)	26.5 (± 3.7)	0.746
MNA ^b Median - IQR	10.0 (9.0–12.0)	11.0 (9.0–13.0)	10.0 (9.0–12.0)	0.185
Hemoglobin gr/dL Mean (± SD)	12.5 (± 2.2)	12.6 (± 2.1)	12.3 (± 2.2)	0.507

	Total N (%) 149 (100)	No Frailty N (%) 90 (60.4%)	Frailty N (%) 59 (39.6%)	P
Creatinine mg/dL Median (IQR)	0.96 (0.79–1.13)	0.96 (0.82–1.06)	0.97 (0.75–1.22)	0.840
Albumin gr/dL Mean (± SD)	3.8 (± 0.5)	3.8 (± 0.5)	3.8 (± 0.5)	0.963
Laparoscopic approach	56 (38.9)	30 (53.6)	26 (46.4)	0.230
Anastomosis:	22 (14.8)	13 (14.4)	9 (15.3)	0.892
No	127 (85.2)	77 (85.6)	50 (84.7)	
Yes				
Transfusions:	116 (77.9)	71 (78.9)	45 (76.3)	0.707
No	33 (22.1)	19 (21.1)	14 (23.7)	
Yes				
T:	45 (30.2)	25 (27.8)	20 (33.9)	0.426
1–2	104 (69.8)	65 (72.2)	39 (66.1)	
3–4				
N:	102 (68.5)	60 (66.7)	42 (71.2)	0.561
0	47 (31.5)	30 (33.3)	17 (28.8)	
1				
M:	142 (95.3)	87 (96.7)	55 (93.2)	0.436
0	7 (4.7)	3 (3.3)	4 (6.8)	
1				
TNM Stage:	99 (66.4)	59 (65.6)	40 (67.8)	0.777
I-II	50 (33.6)	31 (34.4)	19 (32.2)	
III-IV				

	Total N (%) 149 (100)	No Frailty N (%) 90 (60.4%)	Frailty N (%) 59 (39.6%)	P
Anastomosis dehiscence:	139 (93.3)	86 (95.6)	53 (89.8)	0.195
No	10 (6.7)	4 (4.4)	6 (10.2)	
Yes				
CCI $\geq 1^{\circ}$	33.3	21.8	32.4	0.04*
Median (IQR)	(8.7–46.3)	(8.7–41.3)	(20.9–55.4)	
Hospital stay	10	10	9	0.259
Median (IQR)	(7–15)	(7–16)	(7–15)	
Chemotherapy	112 (75.2)	60 (66.7)	52 (88.1)	0.003*
No	37 (24.8)	30 (33.3)	7 (11.9)	
Yes				
30-days mortality:	144 (96.6)	90 (100.0)	54 (91.5)	0.009*
No	5 (3.4%)	0 (0.0)	5 (8.5)	
Yes				
90-days mortality:	137 (91.9)	85 (94.4)	52 (88.1)	0.166
No	12 (8.1)	5 (5.6)	7 (11.9)	
Yes				
1-year mortality:	130 (87.2)	80 (88.9)	50 (84.7)	0.458
No	19 (12.8)	10 (11.1)	9 (15.3)	
Yes				
Cumulative survival at 5 years (mean months)	62.16	63.9	58.9	0.246
Death from non-tumoral causes	21 (43.8)	11 (42.3)	16 (72.7)	0.034*

Univariate analyses of the factors related to long-term survival are summarized in Table 2. Comorbidities, as measured by the Charlson Comorbidity Index ($p = 0.001$); the Lawton-Brody Index ($p = 0.011$); failure to perform an anastomosis ($p = 0.024$); nodal involvement ($p = 0.005$); distant metastases ($p < 0.001$); high TNM stage ($p = 0.004$); and anastomosis dehiscence ($p = 0.013$) were significant univariate predictors of a poor prognosis.

Table 2

Univariate analysis of long-term survival. ^aBMI: Body Mass Index; ^bMNA: Mini-Nutritional-Assessment.
*Statistically significant

	Total N (%) 149 (100)	Alive 101 (67.8%)	Death 48 (32.2%)	P	HR (CI95%)
Median age: (IQR)	75 (72–80)	74 (72–79)	78 (73-80.75)	0.140	1.03 (0.99–1.09)
Gender:	96 (64.4)	61 (60.4)	35 (72.9)	0.074	0.56
Men	53 (35.6)	40 (39.6)	13 (27.1)		(0.30–1.07)
Women					
ASA:	47 (31.5)	36 (35.6)	11 (22.9)	0.241	1.50
I-II	102 (68.5)	65 (64.4)	37 (77.1)		(0.76–2.94)
III-IV					
Charlson Index	3.0	3.0	3.0	0.001*	(1.37–1.60)
Median (IQR)	(2.0–4.0)	(2.0–3.0)	(2.0–5.0)		
Barthel:	14 (9.4)	8 (7.9)	6 (12.5)	0.314	0.64
< 80	135 (90.6)	93 (92.1)	42 (87.5)		(0.27–1.52)
≥ 80					
Lawton-Brody	6.0	7.0	6.0	0.011*	0.85
Median (IQR)	(5.0–8.0)	(5.0–8.0)	(4.0–7.0)		(0.76–0.97)
Pfeiffer:	140 (94.0)	97 (96.0)	43 (89.6)	0.157	1.95
< 3	9 (6.0)	4 (4.0)	5 (55.6)		(0.77–4.94)
≥ 3					
BMI ^a	26.8 (± 4.0)	26.7 (± 4.1)	26.9 (± 3.7)	0.938	1.00
Mean ± SD					(0.94–1.07)
MNA ^b	10.0	10.0	10.5	0.588	0.97
Median - IQR	(9.0–12.0)	(9.0-12.5)	(9.0–12.0)		(0.85–1.09)
Hemoglobin gr/dL	12.5 (± 2.2)	12.6 (± 2.1)	12.3 (± 2.3)	0.703	0.98
Mean (± SD)					(0.86–1.11)

	Total N (%) 149 (100)	Alive 101 (67.8%)	Death 48 (32.2%)	P	HR (CI95%)
Creatinine mg/dL Median (IQR)	0.96 (0.79–1.13)	0.94 (0.79–1.07)	1.00 (0.80–1.33)	0.060	1.66 (0.98–2.81)
Albumin gr/dL Mean ($\pm$ SD)	3.8 ($\pm$ 0.5)	3.8 ($\pm$ 0.5)	3.7 ($\pm$ 0.5)	0.430	0.749 (0.37–1.54)
Laparoscopic approach	56 (38.9)	41 (40.6)	15 (31.3)	0.118	0.635 (0.36–1.12)
Anastomosis: No Yes	22 (14.8) 127 (85.2)	10 (9.9) 91 (90.1)	12 (25.0) 36 (75.0)	0.024*	0.47 (0.24–0.91)
Transfusions: No Yes	116 (77.9) 33 (22.1)	80 (79.2) 21 (20.8)	36 (75.0) 12 (25.0)	0.516	1.24 (0.65–2.39)
T: 1–2 3–4	45 (30.2) 104 (69.8)	34 (33.7) 67 (66.3)	11 (22.9) 37 (77.1)	0.228	1.51 (0.77–2.97)
N: 0 1	102 (68.5) 47 (31.5)	76 (75.2) 25 (24.8)	26 (25.5) 22 (45.8)	0.005*	2.27 (1.29–4.01)
M: 0 1	142 (95.3) 7 (4.7)	100 (99.0) 1 (1.0)	42 (87.5) 6 (12.5)	< 0.001*	6.21 (2.59–14.93)
TNM Stage: I-II III-IV	99 (66.4) 50 (33.6)	74 (73.3) 27 (26.7)	25 (52.1) 23 (15.4)	0.004*	2.29 (1.30–4.04)

	Total	Alive	Death	P	HR
	N (%)	101 (67.8%)	48 (32.2%)		(CI95%)
	149 (100)				
Anastomosis dehiscence:	139 (93.3)	97 (96.0)	42 (87.5)	0.013*	2.95
No	10 (6.7)	4 (4.0)	6 (12.5)		(1.25–6.96)
Yes					

Multivariate analysis (Cox regression) of long-term survival, with adjustment for age, frailty, comorbidities and TNM stage, showed that comorbidities (p = 0.002; HR: 1.30; 95% CI: 1.10–1.54) and TNM stage (p = 0.014; HR: 2.06–95% CI: 1.16–3.67) were the only independent risk factors for survival at five years (Table 3).

Table 3
Multivariate analysis (Cox Regression) of long-term survival, adjusting for age, frailty, comorbidity, and TNM stage. *Statistically significant. B: regression coefficient; CI: confidence interval; HR: hazard ratio; SE: standard error; Wald: test statistic.

	B	SE	Wald	p	HR (95.0% CI)
Age	0.028	0.026	1.229	0.268	1.03 (0.98–1.08)
TNM stage	0.723	0.295	5.999	0.014*	2.06 (1.16–3.67)
Charlson Comorbidity Index	0.263	0.085	9.496	0.002*	1.30 (1.10–1.54)
Frailty	0.044	0.315	0.019	0.889	1.05 (0.56–1.94)

Discussion

This study showed that frail patients were significantly older, were more likely to have impaired cognition, and had a worse functional status, more comorbidities, a higher operative mortality rate, and more serious complications than non-frail patients. These findings, which are related to early outcomes, are in line with what has recently been published in relation to pre-operative frailty [10].

In recent years, there has been an emphasis on the fact that a lack of adequate physiological reserves affects the survival of elderly patients undergoing surgical procedures. Frailty has been defined as a multifactorial syndrome characterized by decreased reserves and less resistance to stressors, resulting from a cumulative decline across multiple physiological systems and the subsequent vulnerability to adverse outcomes [26]. This concept was previously applied, in general, only to non-surgical patients, and there is still no clear consensus regarding its application to elderly surgical patients [27]. Nonetheless, frailty has become an emerging risk stratification measure in surgical risk patients and may also be a valuable quality metric [12].

Therefore, for many authors, an assessment of frailty is essential for estimating the overall and functional outcomes in elderly surgical patients, depending on the planned intervention [28].

For this purpose, the pre-operative performance of the process called the comprehensive geriatric assessment (CGA) is recommended [29]. This is a multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary diagnostic and therapeutic process conducted to determine the medical, mental, and functional problems in older people with frailty so that a coordinated and integrated plan for treatment and follow-up can be developed. The International Society of Geriatric Oncology has recommended the use of the CGA to guide the development of an oncologic treatment plan in older patients with cancer, including those who need to undergo surgery [30]. Nevertheless, there is also a current trend to use previously defined and highly useful frailty scales to detect this deficiency, such as the CSHA-CFS score [15] or the different versions of the Modified Frailty Index of the American College of Surgeons National Surgical Quality Improvement Program (ACS-NSQIP) [12, 31].

Focusing on colorectal cancer surgery, two systematic reviews [10, 14] also reported the same conclusions: frailty is a good predictor of post-operative complications after elective colorectal surgery. Therefore, assessing frailty in colorectal oncology seems important to determining the operative risks and benefits and to guiding peri-operative management. However, the relationship between frailty and long-term survival has not been well studied [10, 31]. Most studies report 30-day mortality [13, 14, 31–34], 3-months mortality [35], and 1-year mortality as output variables [35]. Few studies [36] have provided a follow-up of this population at 5 years. Furthermore, the variable “frailty” in these reports is not usually adjusted for possible confounders such as age, comorbidities and tumour stage. Only Ommundsen et al. [36] reported the results of a multi-variable analysis adjusting frailty for TNM stage, age, and sex in older patients operated on for CRC; however, there was no adjustment for comorbidities. These authors studied 1-year and 5-year survival rates in this population. The comparison between frail and non-frail older patients showed survival rates of 80% and 92%, respectively, for 1-year survival and 24% and 66%, respectively, for 5-year survival. They concluded that the impact of frailty on 5-year survival is comparable with that of TNM stage after CRC surgery. These results differ from those obtained in our series. We observed that the long-term survival of frail patients operated on for colorectal cancer was fundamentally related to comorbidities and tumour stage. Therefore, although operative mortality is higher in frail patients than in non-frail patients, frailty per se does not seem to be a determining factor for the long-term survival of these patients, even after adjustment for comorbidities and tumour stage. Only one study [35] reached the same conclusions, but that study included a small number of patients and a follow-up period of only one year.

The observed differences could be explained if we consider three points of discussion.

First, the definition of the concept of frailty and the method used to assess frailty were different. Although the published literature includes several scales for defining frailty in surgical patients, there is no single gold standard measure for frailty in this context. Multiple frailty screening tools have been developed [8, 37], and their usefulness is somewhat variable among different patient populations, indications for

surgery, and surgical procedures performed. The overwhelming number of risk scales developed, most of which have been applied to small populations, has led to few being used consistently in clinical practice.

In our series, the CSHA-CFS was used to determine frailty. It is simple to administer and correlates well with the frailty index, which has been shown to predict morbidity and mortality in some surgical populations [38]. Although this study did not aim to compare the CSHA-CFS with other frailty scales, the CSHA-CFS has certain advantages, such as being less time-consuming, having been validated, and being easy to perform [38]; in addition, it has very good inter-rater reliability [39]. The proportion of patients with frailty in our study was 40%, which is comparable to the proportions reported in the previously published literature (25–46%) [27].

The ACS-NSQIP 11-item Modified Frailty Index (11-mFI) [12], the ACS-NSQIP 5-item Modified Frailty Index (5-mFI) [13, 31], both based on the CSHA scale; the Fried criteria [26, 33]; the Groningen Frailty Indicator [34, 40]; and a series of cut-offs for the components of the pre-operative geriatric assessment [35, 36], have been used to detect frailty by other authors.

Therefore, given the large number of scales used, it is difficult to make comparisons between the series analysed.

Second, there was confusion between frailty and comorbidities in some of the previously described frailty rating scales. The components of the pre-operative geriatric assessment with cut-off values for frailty used by some authors [35, 36], the 11-mFI [12] and 5-mFI [13, 31] scores mix up, in the same scale, comorbidities with other values used to define frailty. Actually, the terms “frailty”, “disability” and “comorbidity” may be considered somewhat confusing concepts in older surgical patients. According to Richard et al. [41], there is an overlap of these concepts that may determine the systematic evaluation of the three concepts in all patients. Specifically, frailty and comorbidities are prevalent in older adults and are strongly interrelated. Previously, comorbidities were even considered to be a component of frailty [14]. However, we agree with Fried et al [26] that frailty may have a biologic basis and be a distinct clinical syndrome. We believe that it is important to distinguish comorbidities from frailty, and it might be appropriate to assess them separately. A patient may have comorbidities and may not be considered frail, and a frail patient may not necessarily have comorbidities. To avoid this bias, in our study, we used the CSHA to define frailty and analysed comorbidities and disability independently.

Third, the heterogeneity of the studied sample is an important consideration. We included in our series only patients undergoing elective surgery for colorectal cancer. However, other reported series [12, 31] have included patients who underwent any elective or non-elective colorectal procedures. Simon et al. [13], focused on emergency colorectal surgery and showed that frailty is associated with morbidity, mortality and loss of independence in elderly patients.

Therefore, previously published data regarding the relationship of frailty with long-term mortality in patients with colorectal cancer should be analysed with caution.

According to the results obtained, we found that comorbidities prior to intervention and tumour stage are the two strongest predictors of long-term survival in elderly patients with colorectal cancer. Boakye et al. [14] concluded that comorbidities and frailty are strong predictors of survival in CRC patients but did not adjust for these variables and had a short follow-up duration. The possible mechanisms by which comorbidities might affect the prognosis of patients with colorectal cancer have been well documented by these authors. As we observed in our results, there does not seem to be an association between comorbidities and CRC stage at diagnosis. However, comorbidities might independently increase the risk of non-cancer-related deaths. These patients might also have disabilities and worse post-operative outcomes, which could negatively affect their long-term prognosis. Moreover, these patients are less likely to receive standard cancer treatments such as chemotherapy. Comorbidities may also interact with CRC, affecting tumour biology, accelerating disease progression or increasing the risk of mortality [14].

However, tumour stage at diagnosis is by far the most important factor and is the main consideration with regard to treatment recommendations in CRC care guidelines [42]. In our analysis, the effect of tumour stage on long-term survival was very strong and was comparable to the effect of comorbidities. Age, sex, and other predictive variables, such as nutritional status, were not related to long-term survival in our sample.

Knowledge of these factors in this population may help us appropriately advise the patient and their family during the pre-operative decision-making process. This does not mean that we should simply reject the possibility of surgery in frail patients with comorbidities and advanced cancer stages. Another important factor to consider here is the quality of life secondary to sustained functional decline, which is common after colon cancer surgery [43]. Reducing the remaining quality of life in these patients would not make sense. This topic was not studied in this report. Therefore, the decision must be made individually with all the information available on the expected survival and the post-operative quality of life in an attempt to avoid overtreatment or undertreatment, two well-known pitfalls in geriatric oncology [36].

The present study has several limitations. This was a single-centre study, and we wondered if a larger sample size would reveal additional variables that were predictive of long-term mortality in the univariate analysis. However, although it was a prospective design with a long follow-up period and consecutive subject inclusion, in which all of the patients agreed to participate, there may have been a selection bias prior to the referral of each case. This study also has significant strengths, such as the homogeneity of the sample. All of our patients were treated for colorectal cancer with elective surgery, and the long-term mortality was comparable to that published in other series [44]. A standardized pre-operative geriatric assessment was performed in all the patients in the same pre-operative setting in a truly elderly population. Therefore, unlike other recently published studies with heterogeneous populations, we consider that the results obtained in this study could be generalized more specifically to the population of older patients with colorectal cancer.

In conclusion, frailty is associated with poor short-term post-operative outcomes, but it does not seem to affect long-term survival in patients with colorectal cancer. Instead, comorbidities and tumour stage are good predictors of long-term survival. More large-scale studies with adjustment for more prognostic factors are needed.

Abbreviations

ACS-NSQIP

American College of Surgeons National Surgical Quality Improvement Program

ADL

Activities of Daily Living

ASA

American Society of Anesthesiology

CCI

Comprehensive Complication Index

CGA

Comprehensive Geriatric Assessment

ChCI

Charlson Comorbidity Index

CI

Confidence Interval

CRC

Colorectal Cancer

CSHA-CSF

Aging-Clinical Frailty Scale

HR

Hazard Ratio

IQR

Interquartile Range

MNA-SF

Mini Nutritional Assessment Short Form questionnaire

SD

Standard Deviation

SPMSQ

Short Portable Mental State Questionnaire

Declarations

Acknowledgements

Not applicable

Authors' contributions

MAA: data collection, contributed to writing the manuscript

CRC: data collection, contributed to writing the manuscript

RFC: data collection, contributed to writing the manuscript

ACM: data analysis, corrected the manuscript

MAAM: corrected the manuscript

JMG: design, statistic analysis, and coordination.

The authors read, commented, and approved the manuscript.

Funding

Not applicable

Availability of data and materials

Not applicable

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was approved by the Hospital Ethics Committee (Code 120273).

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

References

- [1] Elixhauser A, Andrews RM. Profile of inpatient operating room procedures in US hospitals in 2007. Arch Surg. 2010;145:1201–8.
- [2] Papamichael D, Audisio R, Horiot JC, Glimelius B, Sastre J, Mitry E, et al. Treatment of the elderly colorectal cancer patient: SIOG expert recommendations. Ann Oncol. 2009;20:5–16.
- [3] Artiles-Armas M, Roque-Castellano C, Conde-Martel A, Marchena-Gómez J. The Comprehensive Complication Index is Related to Frailty in Elderly Surgical Patients. J Surg Res. 2019;244:218–24.

- [4] George EL, Hall DE, Youk A, Chen R, Kashikar A, Trickey AW, et al. Association between Patient Frailty and Postoperative Mortality across Multiple Noncardiac Surgical Specialties. *JAMA Surg.* 2020;94305.
- [5] Wilkes JG, Evans JL, Prato BS, Hess SA, MacGillivray DC, Fitzgerald TL. Frailty Cost: Economic Impact of Frailty in the Elective Surgical Patient. *J Am Coll Surg.* 2019;228:861–70.
- [6] Eamer G, Al-Amoodi MJH, Holroyd-Leduc J, Rolfson DB, Warkentin LM, Khadaroo RG. Review of risk assessment tools to predict morbidity and mortality in elderly surgical patients. *Am J Surg.* 2018;216:585–94.
- [7] Tang VL, Jing B, Boscardin J, Ngo S, Silvestrini M, Finlayson E, et al. Association of functional, cognitive, and psychological measures with 1-year mortality in patients undergoing major surgery. *JAMA Surg.* 2020;155:412–8.
- [8] Buigues C, Juarros-Folgado P, Fernandez-Garrido J, Navarro-Martinez R, Cauli O. Frailty syndrome and pre-operative risk evaluation: A systematic review. *Arch Gerontol Geriatr.* 2015;61:309–21.
- [9] Shinall MC, Arya S, Youk A, Varley P, Shah R, Massarweh NN, et al. Association of Preoperative Patient Frailty and Operative Stress with Postoperative Mortality. *JAMA Surg.* 2020;155:1–9.
- [10] Fagard K, Leonard S, Deschodt M, Devriendt E, Wolthuis A, Prenen H, et al. The impact of frailty on postoperative outcomes in individuals aged 65 and over undergoing elective surgery for colorectal cancer: A systematic review. *J Geriatr Oncol.* 2016;7:479–91.
- [11] Okabe H, Ohsaki T, Ogawa K, Ozaki N, Hayashi H, Akahoshi S, et al. Frailty predicts severe postoperative complications after elective colorectal surgery. *Am J Surg.* 2019;217:677–81.
- [12] Keller DS, Bankwitz B, Nobel T, Delaney CP. Using frailty to predict who will fail early discharge after laparoscopic colorectal surgery with an established recovery pathway. *Dis Colon Rectum.* 2014;57:337–42.
- [13] Simon HL, Reif de Paula T, Profeta da Luz MM, Nemeth SK, Moug SJ, Keller DS. Frailty in older patients undergoing emergency colorectal surgery: USA National Surgical Quality Improvement Program analysis. *Br J Surg.* 2020;107:1363–71.
- [14] Boakye D, Rillmann B, Walter V, Jansen L, Hoffmeister M, Brenner H. Impact of comorbidity and frailty on prognosis in colorectal cancer patients: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Cancer Treat Rev.* 2018;64:30–9.
- [15] Rockwood K, Song X, MacKnight C, Bergman H, Hogan DB, McDowell I, et al. A global clinical measure of fitness and frailty in elderly people. *CMAJ.* 2005;173:489–95.
- [16] Charlson ME, Pompei P, Ales KL, MacKenzie CR. A new method of classifying prognostic comorbidity in longitudinal studies: development and validation. *J Chronic Dis.* 1987;40:373–83.

- [17] Zavascki AP, Fuchs SC. The need for reappraisal of AIDS score weight of Charlson comorbidity index. *J Clin Epidemiol*. 2007;60:867–8.
- [18] Dripps R. New classification of physical status. *Anesthesiol*. 1963;24:111.
- [19] Mahoney FI, Barthel DW. Functional Evaluation: The Barthel Index. *Md State Med J*. 1965;14:61–5.
- [20] Gondo Y, Hirose N, Arai Y, Inagaki H, Masui Y, Yamamura K, et al. Functional status of centenarians in Tokyo, Japan: developing better phenotypes of exceptional longevity. *J Gerontol A Biol Sci Med Sci*. 2006;61:305–10.
- [21] Lawton MP, Brody EM. Assessment of older people: self-maintaining and instrumental activities of daily living. *Gerontologist*. 1969;9:179–86.
- [22] Pfeiffer E. A short portable mental status questionnaire for the assessment of organic brain deficit in elderly patients. *J Am Geriatr Soc*. 1975;23:433–41.
- [23] Rubenstein LZ, Harker JO, Salvà A, Guigoz Y, Vellas B. Screening for undernutrition in geriatric practice: Developing the Short-Form Mini-Nutritional Assessment (MNA-SF). *Journals Gerontol - Ser A Biol Sci Med Sci*. 2001;56.
- [24] Slankamenac K, Graf R, Barkun J, Puhan MA, Clavien PA. The comprehensive complication index: a novel continuous scale to measure surgical morbidity. *Ann Surg*. 2013;258:1–7.
- [25] Dindo D, Demartines N, Clavien PA. Classification of surgical complications: a new proposal with evaluation in a cohort of 6336 patients and results of a survey. *Ann Surg*. 2004;240:205–13.
- [26] Fried LP, Tangen CM, Walston J, Newman AB, Hirsch C, Gottdiener J, et al. Frailty in older adults: Evidence for a phenotype. *Journals Gerontol - Ser A Biol Sci Med Sci*. 2001;56.
- [27] Handforth C, Clegg A, Young C, Simpkins S, Seymour MT, Selby PJ, et al. The prevalence and outcomes of frailty in older cancer patients: a systematic review. *Ann Oncol*. 2015;26:1091–101.
- [28] Sandini M, Pinotti E, Persico I, Picone D, Bellelli G, Gianotti L. Systematic review and meta-analysis of frailty as a predictor of morbidity and mortality after major abdominal surgery. *BJS Open*. 2017;1:128–37.
- [29] Ellis G, Gardner M, Tsiachristas A, Langhorne P, Burke O, Harwood RH, et al. Comprehensive geriatric assessment for older adults admitted to hospital. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*. 2017;2017.
- [30] Wildiers H, Heeren P, Puts M, Topinkova E, Janssen-Heijnen MLG, Extermann M, et al. International society of geriatric oncology consensus on geriatric assessment in older patients with cancer. *J Clin Oncol*. 2014;32:2595–603.

- [31] AL-Khamis A, Warner C, Park J, Marecik S, Davis N, Mellgren A, et al. Modified frailty index predicts early outcomes after colorectal surgery: an ACS-NSQIP study. *Color Dis.* 2019;21:1192–205.
- [32] Kristjansson SR, Nesbakken A, Jordhoy MS, Skovlund E, Audisio RA, Johannessen HO, et al. Comprehensive geriatric assessment can predict complications in elderly patients after elective surgery for colorectal cancer: a prospective observational cohort study. *Crit Rev Oncol Hematol.* 2010;76:208–17.
- [33] Tan KY, Kawamura YJ, Tokomitsu A, Tang T. Assessment for frailty is useful for predicting morbidity in elderly patients undergoing colorectal cancer resection whose comorbidities are already optimized. *Am J Surg.* 2012;204:139–43.
- [34] Reisinger KW, van Vugt JL, Tegels JJ, Snijders C, Hulsewe KW, Hoofwijk AG, et al. Functional compromise reflected by sarcopenia, frailty, and nutritional depletion predicts adverse postoperative outcome after colorectal cancer surgery. *Ann Surg.* 2015;261:345–52.
- [35] Samuelsson KS, Egenvall M, Klarin I, Lökk J, Gunnarsson U. Preoperative geriatric assessment and follow-up of patients older than 75 years undergoing elective surgery for suspected colorectal cancer. *J Geriatr Oncol.* 2019;10:709–15.
- [36] Ommundsen N, Wyller TB, Nesbakken A, Jordhøy MS, Bakka A, Skovlund E, et al. Frailty Is an Independent Predictor of Survival in Older Patients With Colorectal Cancer. *Oncologist.* 2014;19:1268–75.
- [37] Ritt M, Bollheimer LC, Sieber CC, Gaßmann KG. Prediction of one-year mortality by five different frailty instruments: A comparative study in hospitalized geriatric patients. *Arch Gerontol Geriatr.* 2016;66:66–72.
- [38] Hewitt J, Carter B, McCarthy K, Pearce L, Law J, Wilson F V, et al. Frailty predicts mortality in all emergency surgical admissions regardless of age. An observational study. *Age Ageing.* 2019;48:388–94.
- [39] Eamer G, Gibson JA, Gillis C, Hsu AT, Krawczyk M, MacDonald E, et al. Surgical frailty assessment: A missed opportunity. *BMC Anesthesiol.* 2017;17:1–8.
- [40] Schuurmans H, Steverink N, Lindenberg S, Frieswijk N, Slaets JPJ. Old or frail: What tells us more? *Journals Gerontol - Ser A Biol Sci Med Sci.* 2004;59:962–5.
- [41] Richards SJG, Frizelle FA, Geddes JA, Eglinton TW, Hampton MB. Frailty in surgical patients. *Int J Colorectal Dis.* 2018;33:1657–66.
- [42] Vogel JD, Eskicioglu C, Weiser MR, Feingold DL, Steele SR. The American society of colon and rectal surgeons clinical practice guidelines for the treatment of colon cancer. *Dis Colon Rectum.* 2017;60:999–1017.
- [43] Finlayson E, Zhao S, Boscardin WJ, Fries BE, Landefeld CS, Dudley RA. Functional status after colon cancer surgery in elderly nursing home residents. *J Am Geriatr Soc.* 2012;60:967–73.

[44] Fagard K, Casaer J, Wolthuis A, Flamaing J, Milisen K, Lobelle JP, et al. Postoperative complications in individuals aged 70 and over undergoing elective surgery for colorectal cancer. Color Dis. 2017;19:0329–38.

Figures

Figure 1

Differences in cumulative survival between non-frail and frail patients. Log-Rank test (p=0.246)