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TECHNOLOGY

Study: Video games can help cut surgical errors

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LOS ANGELES, California (Reuters) -- A new study suggests that people preparing for surgery ask their doctor: "Have you played your video games today?"

Surgeons who warmed up by playing video games like "Super Monkey Ball" for 20 minutes immediately prior to performing surgical drills were faster and made fewer errors than those who did not, said Dr. James "Butch" Rosser, lead investigator on the study slated for release Wednesday.

The research involved 303 surgeons participating in a medical training course that included video games and was focused on laparoscopic surgical procedures -- which use a tiny video camera and long, slender instruments inserted through small incisions.

The study was conducted by Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City in conjunction with the National Institute on Media and the Family.

Doctors were measured on their performance of the "cobra rope" drill, a standard laparoscopic training exercise used to teach how to sew up an internal wound.

Researchers found that surgeons who played video games immediately before the drill completed it an average of 11 seconds faster than those who did not.

Any errors committed during the training lengthened the time it took to complete the task -- indicating that faster finishers made fewer mistakes.

The results supported findings from a small study conducted by Rosser in 2003, which showed that doctors who grew up playing video games tended to be more efficient and less error-prone in laparoscopic training drills. That earlier study suggested that playing video games sharpened eye-hand coordination, reaction time and visual skills.

Laparoscopic surgical procedures can be used on organs such as the gall bladder, uterus or the colon.

Rosser, director of the Advanced Medical Technology Institute at Beth Israel, compares performing laparoscopic surgery to "trying to tie your shoe laces with three-foot-long chopsticks while watching on a TV screen."

The 51-year-old surgeon, who said he has been playing video games since the now-primitive looking "Pong" tennis game was the rage in the 1970s, developed the Top Gun Laparoscopic Surgery Skill and Suturing Program used in the study.

Rosser said he has collected data on 5,000 doctors who have used the training program since its 1991 debut.

His ultimate goal is to clamp down on medical errors that are estimated to contribute to 100,000 deaths each year in the United States by giving surgeons training tools akin to flight simulators used by pilots.

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"We can't practice on patients," he said.

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