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Original Research

# Antireflux surgery and risk of lung cancer by histological type in a multinational cohort study



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Received 23 May 2020; received in revised form 4 July 2020; accepted 17 July 2020

Available online 30 August 2020

## KEYWORDS

Neoplasm;  
Pulmonary;  
Bronchus;  
GORD;  
GERD;  
Fundoplication;

**Abstract Introduction:** Airway micro-aspiration might contribute to the proposed associations between gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) and some lung diseases, including lung cancer. This study aimed to examine the hypothesis that antireflux surgery decreases the risk of small cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and adenocarcinoma of the lung differently depending on their location in relation to micro-aspiration.

**Methods:** Population-based cohort study including patients having undergone antireflux surgery during 1980–2014 in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway or Sweden. Patients having

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undergone antireflux surgery were compared with two groups: 1) the corresponding background population, by calculating standardised incidence ratios (SIRs) with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) and 2) non-operated GERD-patients, by calculating hazard ratios (HRs) with 95% CIs using multivariable Cox regression with adjustment for sex, age, calendar period, country, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and obesity diagnosis or type 2 diabetes.

**Results:** Among all 812,617 GERD-patients, 46,996 (5.8%) had undergone antireflux surgery. The SIRs were statistically significantly decreased for small cell carcinoma (SIR = 0.57, 95% CI 0.41–0.77) and squamous cell carcinoma (SIR = 0.75, 95% CI 0.60–0.92), but not for adenocarcinoma of the lung (SIR = 0.90, 95% CI 0.76–1.06). The HRs were also below unity for small cell carcinoma (HR = 0.63, 95% CI 0.44–0.90) and squamous cell carcinoma (HR = 0.80, 95% CI 0.62–1.03), but not for adenocarcinoma of the lung (HR = 1.03, 95% CI 0.84–1.26). Analyses restricted to patients with objective GERD (reflux oesophagitis or Barrett's oesophagus) showed similar results.

**Conclusions:** This all-Nordic study indicates that patients who undergo antireflux surgery are at decreased risk of small cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma of the lung, but not of adenocarcinoma of the lung.

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## 1. Introduction

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), characterised by troublesome heartburn or regurgitation or GERD-specific complications, affects 20% of adults in Western countries [1–4]. Reflux of duodenogastric contents might result in micro-aspiration to the airways [5–7], where it can cause lung diseases, i.e. asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, pneumonia, idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis and bronchiolitis obliterans syndrome [6–10]. Therefore, in addition to the known associations between GERD and cancer of the oesophagus, larynx and pharynx [11–14], an association with lung cancer has been suggested [15–18]. Yet, no study has examined if antireflux therapy counteracts lung cancer. Medication with proton pump inhibitors reduces the acidity of the duodenogastric contents and relieves symptoms of heartburn but does not stop non-acidic reflux, regurgitation or aspiration, why airway symptoms may still persist or arise [19]. Antireflux surgery, on the other hand, accomplishes a barrier to acidic and non-acidic reflux and can reduce asthma symptoms in GERD-patients [20–22] and improve pulmonary function in lung transplantation patients [23–25]. While lung cancer has one of the highest cancer incidences and mortalities worldwide, the incidence of lung cancer in the Nordic countries is among the lowest in Europe [26,27]. The three main histological types of lung cancer, i.e. small cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and adenocarcinoma, have different etiological, clinical and molecular characteristics, although tobacco smoking is a shared risk factor [28]. Small cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma primarily arise in the central airways, i.e. closer to any aspiration, while adenocarcinoma mostly arise more peripherally [29]. This multinational Nordic study aimed to test the

hypothesis that antireflux surgery decreases the risk of small cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and adenocarcinoma of the lung in GERD-patients, and that this decrease is stronger for small cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma than for adenocarcinoma because of the differences in proximity to aspirated refluxate.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Design

This was a population-based cohort study based on well-established and nationwide health data registries in the five Nordic countries, i.e. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden (alphabetic order). The overall study period was from 1980 through 2014, but with different start and end years in each country. The study separately investigated the risk of small cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and adenocarcinoma of the lung after antireflux surgery for GERD. Ethical and data permissions were retrieved from all relevant authorities within each country [30].

### 2.2. Cohorts

The source cohort, entitled the Nordic Antireflux Surgery Cohort (NordASCo), has been presented in detail in a cohort profile [30]. In summary, data were collected from health data registries, i.e. the patient registries, cancer registries and cause of death registries in the Nordic countries. The similarity in the structure of the health data registries in the Nordic countries, combined with the well-established system of the unique personal identity number assigned to each resident in all Nordic countries, allowed linkages of the individuals' data

between the registries and merging of the collected data [30,31].

The patients in the study cohort, who had GERD documented from in-hospital and specialised out-patient care in any of the national patient registries, were between 18 and 95 years of age, and without any lung cancer before the GERD diagnosis. A sub-cohort was restricted to patients with objective GERD, i.e. objectively determined reflux oesophagitis or Barrett's oesophagus (a columnar cell metaplasia preceding oesophageal adenocarcinoma).

The codes defining GERD, objective GERD and antireflux surgery in the patient registries are presented in [Supplementary Table 1](#). While complete nationwide coverage of the patient registries was reached in the 1970s (Finland), 1978 (Denmark), 1987 (Sweden), 1999 (Iceland) and 2008 (Norway), this study started from 1980, from when data on antireflux surgery was available. The data in these registries have high validity with most diagnoses and operations having a positive predictive value close to 100% [32–34]. The diagnosis of GERD has not been separately validated in the Nordic patient registries; however, the diagnosis codes that correspond to reflux oesophagitis and Barrett's oesophagus require confirmation by endoscopy and histology, which should counteract misclassification. Norwegian GERD patients were excluded from the sub-analyses of objective GERD because four-character sub-categories of diagnosis codes were not available in the Norwegian patient registry.

### 2.3. Outcomes

The three outcomes, i.e. small cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and adenocarcinoma of the lung, were identified in the cancer registries by their relevant diagnosis codes ([Supplementary Table 2](#)). The cancer registries provided data on tumour topography, morphology and diagnosis date. To reduce misclassification, histological sub-types that were ill-defined, or that potentially represented poor or undifferentiated forms of lung cancer were excluded. All Nordic cancer registries have been nationwide since their initiation in 1943 (Denmark), 1953 (Norway), 1953 (Finland), 1955 (Iceland) and 1958 (Sweden). Validation studies of these registries have consistently shown high completeness ( $\geq 98.2\%$ ) and accuracy ( $\geq 93.8\%$ ) [35]. The cancer registries provided data on cancer incidence in the study cohort. Combined with the registries of the total populations, the cancer registries also provided data on population count and number of lung cancers by histological type in the general background populations by age, sex and calendar year in each Nordic country, which enabled calculation of these tumours' incidence rates in the background population.

### 2.4. Statistical analysis

When calculating person-years at risk, the first year of follow-up was excluded to avoid detection bias, i.e. earlier tumour detection because of the GERD diagnosis or the antireflux surgery. Person-years at risk in the antireflux surgery groups with any GERD or objective GERD were accumulated from 1 year after surgery until the date of any lung cancer, death or end of study period, whichever occurred first. Person-years at risk in the non-operated groups with any GERD or objective GERD were accumulated from 1 year after the date of GERD until the first occurrence of any type of lung cancer, death, end of the study period or the date of admission for antireflux surgery. In this way, GERD patients who underwent antireflux surgery were censored from the non-operated group at the date of admission for antireflux surgery, and 1 year after that date included in the antireflux surgery group instead.

Two statistical approaches were used to calculate the measures of relative risks. The incidence in the cohort was first compared with the incidence of the corresponding background population by calculating standardised incidence ratios (SIRs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs). The observed number of small cell carcinomas, squamous cell carcinomas or adenocarcinomas of the lung in the patient cohorts was divided by the expected number among individuals of the corresponding sex (male or female), age group (5-year categories) and calendar period (5-year categories). SIRs were computed for the overall period ( $>1-34$  years) and separately for the specific follow-up categories, i.e.  $>1-5$ ,  $>5-10$ ,  $>10-15$  and  $>15$  years. It was not possible to exclude the cases of small cell carcinomas, squamous cell carcinomas or adenocarcinomas in the cohort from the background population, but the low incidence of these tumours means that the results would not be much influenced and any influence would dilute estimates rather than contribute to associations.

In the second statistical approach, the risk of lung cancer in the antireflux surgery groups with any GERD and objective GERD were compared with the non-operated groups with any GERD or objective GERD, using the non-operated groups as references. Multivariable Cox regression was used to calculate hazard ratios (HRs) and 95% CIs, adjusted for six potential confounders: sex (male or female), age (continuous), calendar period (1980–1989, 1990–1999 or 2000–2014), country (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway or Sweden), chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (yes or no) and obesity diagnosis or diabetes mellitus type 2 (yes or no). Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease was used as a marker of tobacco smoking, whereas obesity diagnosis or diabetes mellitus type 2 represented obesity in the models. These conditions are chronic and were thus measured without time restrictions. The follow-up

categories were the same as those described above for the calculation of SIRs, i.e. >1–34, >1–5, >5–10, >10–15 and >15 years. The proportionality hazards assumption was examined by plotting log (-log) survival function versus log analysis time. The assumption was met for small cell carcinoma, but not for squamous cell carcinoma or adenocarcinoma, which was solved by the stratification into follow-up time periods.

The data management and statistical analyses followed a pre-defined study protocol and were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 24 (IBM Corp, Armonk, NY, USA).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Patients

Of all 812,617 cohort patients with any GERD (5,011,842 person-years at risk), 46,996 (5.8%) underwent antireflux surgery (555,748 person-years at risk). Among patients in the non-operated group, 13,332 were censored and included in the antireflux surgery group from the date of admission to antireflux surgery. Of 269,318 patients with objective GERD, 34,752 (12.9%) underwent antireflux surgery (Table 1). Among patients with any GERD, 3650 (0.5%) developed lung cancer during follow-up in the non-operated group and 273 (0.6%) in the operated group. In patients with objective GERD, 1491 (0.6%) and 191 (0.5%) developed lung cancer in the non-operated and operated group, respectively (Table 1).

#### 3.2. Operated patients with gastroesophageal reflux disease compared with the background population

Table 2A shows the SIRs after antireflux surgery for any GERD. The overall SIRs were particularly decreased for small cell carcinoma (SIR 0.57, 95% CI 0.41–0.77) and also for squamous cell carcinoma (SIR 0.75, 95% CI 0.60–0.92), but not for adenocarcinoma of the lung (SIR 0.90, 95% CI 0.76–1.06). The SIRs did not decrease with longer follow-up time after antireflux surgery for any of the three histological types. In the analyses of patients with objective GERD, most estimates were similar to those in the entire GERD cohort (Table 2B).

#### 3.3. Non-operated patients with gastroesophageal reflux disease compared with the background population

The SIRs were lower for small cell carcinoma (SIR 0.83, 95% CI 0.77–0.89), squamous cell carcinoma (SIR 0.87, 95% CI 0.82–0.92) and adenocarcinoma (SIR 0.83, 95% CI 0.80–0.87) (Table 2A). The SIRs did not change much over follow-up periods, and the results were similar for objective GERD (Table 2B).

Table 1  
Characteristics of individuals with gastroesophageal reflux disease having undergone antireflux surgery or not.

	Antireflux surgery Number (%)	No antireflux surgery Number (%)
<b>Any gastroesophageal reflux disease</b>		
<b>Total</b>		
Patients <sup>a</sup>	46,996 (100)	778,943 (100)
Person-years of follow-up	555,748	5,011,842
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	26,475 (56.3)	378,245 (48.6)
Female	20,521 (43.7)	400,698 (51.4)
<b>Age at inclusion</b>		
<50 years	22,088 (47.0)	256,401 (32.9)
50–<65 years	18,218 (38.8)	237,215 (30.5)
≥65 years	6690 (14.2)	285,327 (36.6)
<b>Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease</b>	3821 (8.1)	69,889 (9.0)
<b>Obesity diagnosis</b>	2267 (4.8)	38,850 (5.0)
<b>Diabetes mellitus type 2</b>	3960 (8.4)	78,221 (10.0)
<b>Lung cancer</b>	273 (0.6) [100]	3650 (0.5) [100]
Small cell carcinoma	43 [15.8]	724 [19.8]
Squamous cell carcinoma	88 [32.2]	1152 [31.6]
Adenocarcinoma	142 [52.0]	1774 [48.6]
<b>Objective gastroesophageal reflux disease (reflux oesophagitis or Barrett's oesophagus)</b>		
<b>Total</b>		
Patients	34,752 (100)	242,292 (100)
Person-years of follow-up	425,008	1,993,691
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	20,063 (57.7)	133,703 (55.2)
Female	14,689 (42.3)	108,589 (44.8)
<b>Age at inclusion</b>		
<50 years	16,731 (48.1)	76,808 (31.7)
50–<65 years	13,758 (39.6)	76,837 (31.7)
≥65 years	4263 (12.3)	88,647 (36.6)
<b>Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease</b>	2797 (8.0)	26,746 (11.0)
<b>Obesity diagnosis</b>	1670 (4.8)	14,248 (5.9)
<b>Diabetes mellitus type 2</b>	3024 (8.7)	30,608 (12.6)
<b>Lung cancer</b>	191 (0.5) [100]	1491 (0.6) [100]
Small cell carcinoma	31 [16.2]	313 [21.0]
Squamous cell carcinoma	59 [30.9]	472 [31.7]
Adenocarcinoma	101 [52.9]	674 [45.2]

<sup>a</sup> Among the non-operated patients, 13,322 were also included in the operated group after they were censored from the non-operated group at the date of admission to antireflux surgery.

#### 3.4. Operated compared with non-operated patients with gastroesophageal reflux disease

Table 3A presents the HRs for the group who had undergone antireflux surgery for any GERD compared with the non-operated group with any GERD. The overall adjusted HRs after antireflux surgery were decreased for small cell carcinoma (HR 0.63, 95% CI 0.44–0.90), decreased without statistical significance for squamous cell carcinoma (HR 0.80, 95% CI 0.62–1.03), and not decreased for adenocarcinoma (HR 1.03, 95% CI 0.84–1.26). The HRs did not decrease over time after antireflux surgery for any of the histological types, but for small cell carcinoma, the point estimates remained

Table 2A

Risk of lung cancer by histological type among patients with any gastroesophageal reflux disease compared with the corresponding background population, presented as standardised incidence ratios (SIRs) with 95% confidence intervals (95% CIs).

Follow-up (years)	Total (n)	Person-years	Small cell carcinoma		Squamous cell carcinoma		Adenocarcinoma	
			Cases (n)	SIR (95% CI)	Cases (n)	SIR (95% CI)	Cases (n)	SIR (95% CI)
<b>Antireflux surgery</b>								
>1–34	46,966	555,748	43	0.57 (0.41–0.77)	88	0.75 (0.60–0.92)	142	0.90 (0.76–1.06)
>1–5	46,966	176,254	14	0.75 (0.41–1.26)	16	0.59 (0.34–0.95)	24	0.74 (0.47–1.09)
>5–10	40,618	179,507	7	0.31 (0.12–0.64)	25	0.73 (0.47–1.08)	42	0.94 (0.68–1.27)
>10–15	30,142	117,401	11	0.62 (0.31–1.11)	19	0.67 (0.40–1.05)	40	1.00 (0.72–1.37)
>15	16,605	82,585	11	0.68 (0.34–1.22)	28	1.00 (0.66–1.44)	36	0.89 (0.62–1.23)
<b>No antireflux surgery</b>								
>1–34	778,943	5,011,842	724	0.83 (0.77–0.89)	1152	0.87 (0.82–0.92)	1774	0.83 (0.80–0.87)
>1–5	778,943	2,406,216	332	0.86 (0.77–0.96)	550	0.95 (0.87–1.03)	786	0.88 (0.82–0.94)
>5–10	437,681	1,532,301	200	0.77 (0.67–0.89)	322	0.81 (0.73–0.91)	562	0.87 (0.80–0.95)
>10–15	212,288	707,015	114	0.82 (0.67–0.98)	160	0.76 (0.64–0.88)	274	0.76 (0.68–0.86)
>15	83,989	366,310	78	0.88 (0.69–1.10)	120	0.87 (0.72–1.04)	152	0.67 (0.57–0.79)

Table 2B

Risk of lung cancer by histological type among patients with objective gastroesophageal reflux disease (reflux oesophagitis or Barrett's oesophagus) compared to the corresponding background population, presented as standardised incidence ratios (SIRs) with 95% confidence intervals (95% CIs).

Follow-up (years)	Total (n)	Person-years	Small cell carcinoma		Squamous cell carcinoma		Adenocarcinoma	
			Cases (n)	SIR (95% CI)	Cases (n)	SIR (95% CI)	Cases (n)	SIR (95% CI)
<b>Antireflux surgery</b>								
>1–34	34,752	425,008	31	0.58 (0.39–0.82)	59	0.70 (0.53–0.90)	101	0.88 (0.72–1.07)
>1–5	34,752	132,274	9	0.69 (0.32–1.31)	8	0.42 (0.18–0.83)	14	0.61 (0.34–1.03)
>5–10	31,066	138,898	4	0.24 (0.07–0.62)	22	0.88 (0.55–1.33)	29	0.87 (0.58–1.25)
>10–15	23,387	91,544	8	0.61 (0.26–1.20)	15	0.71 (0.40–1.17)	28	0.93 (0.62–1.35)
>15	12,986	62,292	10	0.92 (0.44–1.69)	14	0.72 (0.39–1.21)	30	1.06 (0.71–1.51)
<b>No antireflux surgery</b>								
>1–34	242,292	1,993,691	313	0.88 (0.78–0.98)	472	0.84 (0.77–0.92)	674	0.81 (0.75–0.87)
>1–5	242,292	808,109	121	0.92 (0.76–1.10)	190	0.91 (0.76–1.05)	239	0.83 (0.73–0.95)
>5–10	165,876	639,932	80	0.71 (0.56–0.88)	144	0.82 (0.69–0.97)	202	0.77 (0.67–0.88)
>10–15	93,809	329,116	63	0.98 (0.75–1.25)	79	0.79 (0.63–0.98)	137	0.86 (0.73–1.02)
>15	43,044	216,534	49	1.04 (0.77–1.37)	59	0.77 (0.59–1.00)	96	0.78 (0.63–0.95)

below 1 throughout the follow-up period. The HRs were not much influenced by adjustment for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (Table 3A). The analyses of patients with objective GERD showed similar results as to the total GERD cohort, although most point estimates were slightly lower (Table 3B). The overall HRs were 0.55 (95% CI 0.36–0.84) for small cell carcinoma, 0.73 (95% CI 0.53–1.01) for squamous cell carcinoma and 0.95 (95% CI 0.74–1.21) for adenocarcinoma, and all point estimates were below 1 throughout the follow-up (Table 3B).

#### 4. Discussion

This study indicates that patients who undergo antireflux surgery for GERD have decreased risks of small cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma, but not of adenocarcinoma of the lung, compared with the background population as well as the non-operated patients with GERD.

Among methodological strengths of this study are the population-based design and the large cohort size, including most patients with a recorded diagnosis of GERD and those who had undergone antireflux surgery for GERD in any of the five Nordic countries. The long (up to 34 years) and complete follow-up are other advantages. The similar results from the analysis of the any GERD group and the objective GERD group indicate a low level of misclassification of GERD. The similar findings when comparing the antireflux surgery group with both the background population and non-operated patients with GERD also suggests validity of the results. A weakness is the risk of residual confounding despite adjustment for several confounders. The unavailability of direct data on tobacco smoking might be particularly relevant. Individuals selected for antireflux surgery might be less likely to be heavy tobacco smokers, and smoking is a risk factor for GERD and the three histological types of lung cancer under study [4,36]. However, a strong influence of confounding by smoking is less likely because of the weak association between

Table 3A

Risk of lung cancer by histological type among patients with any gastroesophageal reflux disease, comparing antireflux surgery with no such surgery and presented as hazard ratios (HRs) with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) from the Cox proportional hazard analyses.

Follow-up (years)	No antireflux surgery		Antireflux surgery			
	Cases (n)	HR (95% CI)	Cases (n)	Crude HR (95% CI)	Adjusted <sup>a</sup> HR (95% CI)	Adjusted <sup>b</sup> HR (95% CI)
<b>Small cell carcinoma</b>						
>1–34	724	1.00 (Reference)	43	0.51 (0.37–0.69)	0.64 (0.45–0.90)	0.63 (0.44–0.90)
>1–5	332	1.00 (Reference)	14	0.58 (0.34–0.99)	0.80 (0.43–1.48)	0.81 (0.44–1.49)
>5–10	200	1.00 (Reference)	7	0.30 (0.14–0.64)	0.38 (0.16–0.90)	0.37 (0.16–0.89)
>10–15	114	1.00 (Reference)	11	0.57 (0.31–1.06)	0.67 (0.32–1.40)	0.66 (0.32–1.37)
>15	78	1.00 (Reference)	11	0.62 (0.33–1.17)	0.72 (0.37–1.40)	0.71 (0.37–1.38)
<b>Squamous cell carcinoma</b>						
>1–34	1152	1.00 (Reference)	88	0.66 (0.53–0.82)	0.81 (0.63–1.04)	0.80 (0.62–1.03)
>1–5	550	1.00 (Reference)	16	0.40 (0.24–0.66)	0.58 (0.32–1.04)	0.58 (0.33–1.03)
>5–10	322	1.00 (Reference)	25	0.67 (0.44–1.00)	0.74 (0.45–1.22)	0.74 (0.45–1.21)
>10–15	160	1.00 (Reference)	19	0.71 (0.44–1.14)	0.87 (0.50–1.51)	0.86 (0.50–1.49)
>15	120	1.00 (Reference)	28	1.02 (0.68–1.54)	1.16 (0.74–1.81)	1.13 (0.72–1.77)
<b>Adenocarcinoma</b>						
>1–34	1774	1.00 (Reference)	142	0.70 (0.58–0.82)	1.04 (0.85–1.27)	1.03 (0.84–1.26)
>1–5	786	1.00 (Reference)	24	0.42 (0.28–0.62)	0.84 (0.53–1.33)	0.83 (0.52–1.32)
>5–10	562	1.00 (Reference)	42	0.64 (0.47–0.87)	1.08 (0.75–1.55)	1.07 (0.74–1.54)
>10–15	274	1.00 (Reference)	40	0.88 (0.63–1.22)	1.10 (0.74–1.63)	1.09 (0.73–1.62)
>15	152	1.00 (Reference)	36	1.05 (0.73–1.51)	1.13 (0.76–1.69)	1.12 (0.75–1.67)

<sup>a</sup> Adjusted for sex, age (continuous), calendar period, country, obesity diagnosis and diabetes mellitus type 2.

<sup>b</sup> Adjusted for sex, age (continuous), calendar period, country, obesity diagnosis, diabetes mellitus type 2 and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

smoking and GERD [4,37], and by the lack of influence of the adjustment for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in the Cox regression analyses. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is namely strongly associated with smoking duration and intensity [38]. Confounding by other variables cannot be excluded, but

except for smoking, the only established risk factors for GERD are obesity and heredity for GERD, which are not associated with the risk of lung cancer and should therefore not confound the results. Therefore, it was expected that adjustment for obesity diagnoses did not influence the HRs. The results from a study examining

Table 3B

Risk of lung cancer by histological type among patients with objective gastroesophageal reflux disease (reflux oesophagitis or Barrett's oesophagus), comparing antireflux surgery with no such surgery and presented as hazard ratios (HRs) with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) from the Cox proportional hazard analyses.

Follow-up (years)	No antireflux surgery		Antireflux surgery			
	Cases (n)	HR (95% CI)	Cases (n)	Crude HR (95% CI)	Adjusted <sup>a</sup> HR (95% CI)	Adjusted <sup>b</sup> HR (95% CI)
<b>Small cell carcinoma</b>						
>1–34	313	1.00 (Reference)	31	0.45 (0.31–0.65)	0.54 (0.35–0.83)	0.55 (0.36–0.84)
>1–5	121	1.00 (Reference)	9	0.46 (0.23–0.90)	0.51 (0.23–1.15)	0.52 (0.23–1.16)
>5–10	80	1.00 (Reference)	4	0.23 (0.08–0.63)	0.34 (0.11–1.09)	0.35 (0.11–1.09)
>10–15	63	1.00 (Reference)	8	0.45 (0.22–0.94)	0.54 (0.22–1.29)	0.54 (0.23–1.30)
>15	49	1.00 (Reference)	10	0.71 (0.36–1.40)	0.88 (0.43–1.82)	0.88 (0.43–1.81)
<b>Squamous cell carcinoma</b>						
>1–34	472	1.00 (Reference)	59	0.58 (0.44–0.76)	0.73 (0.53–1.01)	0.73 (0.53–1.01)
>1–5	190	1.00 (Reference)	8	0.26 (0.13–0.52)	0.42 (0.19–0.95)	0.43 (0.19–0.96)
>5–10	144	1.00 (Reference)	22	0.71 (0.45–1.11)	0.74 (0.42–1.31)	0.75 (0.43–1.32)
>10–15	79	1.00 (Reference)	15	0.69 (0.39–1.19)	0.91 (0.48–1.73)	0.91 (0.48–1.73)
>15	59	1.00 (Reference)	14	0.84 (0.47–1.51)	0.93 (0.49–1.76)	0.92 (0.48–1.74)
<b>Adenocarcinoma</b>						
>1–34	674	1.00 (Reference)	101	0.67 (0.55–0.83)	0.94 (0.74–1.21)	0.95 (0.74–1.21)
>1–5	239	1.00 (Reference)	14	0.36 (0.21–0.61)	0.75 (0.40–1.39)	0.74 (0.40–1.38)
>5–10	202	1.00 (Reference)	29	0.66 (0.45–0.98)	1.05 (0.66–1.66)	1.05 (0.66–1.66)
>10–15	137	1.00 (Reference)	28	0.73 (0.49–1.10)	0.85 (0.52–1.39)	0.86 (0.53–1.40)
>15	96	1.00 (Reference)	30	1.10 (0.73–1.66)	1.14 (0.72–1.82)	1.14 (0.72–1.82)

<sup>a</sup> Adjusted for sex, age (continuous), calendar period, country, obesity diagnosis and diabetes mellitus type 2.

<sup>b</sup> Adjusted for sex, age (continuous), calendar period, country, obesity diagnosis, diabetes mellitus type 2 and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

oesophageal adenocarcinoma from the same cohort showed no influence of antireflux surgery, further indicating that the antireflux surgery group was not selected compared with the background population or the non-operated group with GERD [39]. Another limitation is the potential influence of recurrence of GERD after antireflux surgery, which occurred in 17.7% of Swedish patients included in the cohort [40]. This exposure misclassification should not contribute to the overall associations, but rather dilute them. However, it could explain the lack of risk reductions over time after antireflux surgery. The lack of data on specific surgical codes prohibited separate analyses of specific types of antireflux surgery, but the commonly used antireflux surgery procedures have similar effects on GERD [41]. Histological misclassification of squamous cell carcinoma and adenocarcinoma of the lung is possible due to pathologic sub-typing disagreement. However, this has been shown to be limited and would only attenuate the reported risk estimates, not explain them [42,43]. The prevalence of GERD is comparable between Nordic countries and other Western countries [1,2], suggesting that the findings could be generalised to Western populations.

To our knowledge, no other study has investigated if antireflux surgery influences the risk of lung cancer. The decreased overall risks of small cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma of the lung suggest a protective role of antireflux surgery. During follow-up, the risk reduction seemed more pronounced within 5–10 years for small cell carcinoma and 1–5 years for squamous cell carcinoma. A cancer preventive effect of antireflux surgery is expected to increase with longer follow-up; therefore, a cautious interpretation is necessary because of the lack of trend of further reduction in risk by time after surgery, although recurrence of GERD after surgery might be the explanation for this pattern [40]. More research is clearly needed to confirm these findings. Nevertheless, it is biologically plausible that antireflux surgery counteracts micro-aspiration of acidic and non-acidic duodenogastric content in patients with reflux, which may reduce inflammatory insults and subsequent oncogenic processes. This mechanism gains support by the finding that antireflux surgery in lung transplantation patients with GERD reduces pepsin levels in the lungs [44]. As described in detail elsewhere, antireflux medication was used by 92.1% of a sample of 199,466 non-operated GERD patients included in the present cohort [39]. The lower risk of lung cancer after antireflux surgery compared with antireflux medication use in the non-operated GERD groups is expected because antireflux medication does not prevent airway aspiration well. The findings of decreased risks of small cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma, but not of adenocarcinoma, following antireflux surgery are well in line with the study hypotheses. This could be due to anatomical reasons, with small cell carcinoma and

squamous cell carcinoma primarily arising in the central airways [29], anatomically closer to micro-aspirations than the peripheral airways, where adenocarcinoma mostly arise. These histology-specific differences should strengthen the reason for further studies of antireflux surgery and lung cancer.

Two cohort studies have found an increased risk of lung cancer in patients with GERD, which remained after controlling for tobacco smoking [17,18]. The slightly lower risk of lung cancer among non-operated GERD-patients compared with the background population in the present study was unexpected. Speculatively, the above-mentioned vast use of antireflux medication (mainly proton pump inhibitors) in non-operated GERD patients could possibly contribute to this finding. Although antireflux medication does not prevent airway micro-aspiration, it does reduce the acidity of the refluxate, which could theoretically decrease potential oncogenic inflammatory insults in the lungs. Individuals with GERD who seek in-hospital or outpatient specialised care might have greater health consciousness and thus may be more likely to take antireflux medication to alleviate their symptoms, less likely to smoke or more likely to stop smoking compared with the background population.

In conclusion, this large and population-based cohort study in the five Nordic countries suggests that GERD-patients who undergo antireflux surgery have a decreased risk of small cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma, but not of adenocarcinoma of the lung.

#### Author involvement

Study concept and design: all authors. Acquisition of data: all authors. Analysis and interpretation of data: MY, GS, ENJ, JMO and JL. Drafting of the manuscript: MY. Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content: all authors. Statistical analysis: MY and GS. Obtained funding: JL. Study supervision: JL.

#### Funding

This work was supported by the Nordic Cancer Union (grant number 186058), Swedish Cancer Society (grant number 180684), and Swedish Research Council (grant number 340-2013-5478). Jesper Lagergren was supported by the United European Gastroenterology Research Prize and the Distinguished Professor Award at Karolinska Institutet.

#### Conflict of interest statement

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejca.2020.07.018>.

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