

Joint Replacement--Is It Time To Take That Step?

Americans are enjoying longer, more active lives than any time in history. Yet, as we age our bodies change and a lifetime of activity and occasional abuse takes its toll on everyone. Sometimes those changes result in specific problems related to joints and muscles. Painful, stiff joints can become lifestyle altering and prevent many individuals from participating in the daily activities they enjoy.

When they're working well, our joints are remarkable, allowing us to move easily and smoothly. However, when the joints aren't working well because of injuries or arthritis, the pain can be remarkable as well.

The pain may be manageable, for a while; topical creams, heating pads, ice packs, ibuprofen, all give some relief, temporarily. But as time goes by and the pain gets worse, you may find that home treatments aren't quite as effective as they once were, that you're limited to certain activities, and your quality of life is beginning to deteriorate. At this point, you ask yourself, is it time for joint replacement?

What is Joint Replacement? Joints are formed by the ends of two or more bones connected by tissue called cartilage. Healthy cartilage serves as a protective cushion, allowing smooth, low friction movement of the joint. If the cartilage becomes damaged by disease or injury, the tissues around the joint become inflamed, causing pain. With time, the cartilage wears away, allowing the rough edges of bone to rub against each other, causing more pain.

When only some of the joint is damaged, a surgeon may be able to repair or replace just the damaged parts. When the entire joint is damaged, a total joint replacement is done. To replace a total hip or knee joint, a surgeon removes the diseased or damaged parts and inserts artificial parts, called prostheses or implants. These prostheses are considered medical devices, which are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration.

Why Joint Replacement? The most common reason for having a hip or knee replaced is osteoarthritis, according to the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS). This degenerative joint disease, marked by the breakdown of the joint's cartilage, is not limited to older people. Although it most commonly affects people over age 45, younger men and women can also get this disease.

Some people are born with a deformed joint or defective cartilage, which leads to osteoarthritis. Excess weight, joint fracture, ligament tears, or other injury can damage cartilage and cause osteoarthritis.

Rheumatoid arthritis is another condition that may be alleviated by hip or knee joint replacement. This chronic inflammation of the joint lining causes pain, stiffness, and swelling. The inflamed lining can invade and damage bone and cartilage. Rheumatoid arthritis generally starts in middle age, but can also affect children and young adults.

Loss of bone caused by poor blood supply (avascular necrosis) and bone tumors may be other reasons for joint replacement.

Is Joint Replacement For You? You're the best judge of whether joint replacement is a good option for you. You may wish to consider it if:

- Medicines and topical creams no longer help relieve pain
- Pain is getting worse
- Pain interferes with daily tasks, such as bathing, dressing and climbing stairs

- You've given up hobbies of favorite activities because of pain
- Joint pain makes you more dependent on help from friends and family

You'll want to discuss the pros and cons with your doctor. Be specific with your doctor, make sure you understand all the information that you are given, and don't feel intimidated about asking any question that you have. It's important for you to be educated and informed as much as possible.

The Risks of Replacement. Like any surgery, hip and knee joint replacement carries certain risks, such as infection, blood clots and complications from anesthesia. Other complications include nerve damage, dislocation or breakage after surgery, and wearing out of loosening of the joint over time.

What to Ask Your Orthopedic Surgeon. Here are some questions to ask your orthopedic surgeon about joint replacement:

- What makes someone a good candidate for joint surgery?
- What are the risks involved in joint surgery?
- Would there be any other non-surgical treatments I haven't yet tried that would work to ease my pain and help me move more easily?
- How would surgery help my particular problem?
- What would not change after the operation?
- How long is the recovery process?
- What is involved in the recovery process?
- What type of procedure would you recommend for me?
- Can you tell me what the outcome (decreased pain, improved function) has been for most of your patients?

There is no need to suffer with joint pain and a decreased ability for activities. Make an appointment to see an orthopedic surgeon and take that first step towards recovery.