

The Older Adult's Guide to Joint Replacement

Nearly 800,000 Americans have hip or knee joint replacement surgery every year. And that number is expected to rise dramatically in the coming decades as the nation's Baby Boomers reach retirement age.

Knee and hip replacement can ease pain and improve movement and function in joints damaged by disease or injury. The surgery -- in which damaged or diseased parts of the joint are replaced with metal or plastic substitutes -- has a very high success rate. That said, there are some risks. A small percentage of people who have the surgery, for example, develop joint infections. And recovery after surgery takes several weeks.

It can take up to six months for a full recovery from hip replacement surgery, but by planning out your recovery in advance, it may be quicker.

ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS

If you have joint pain but can keep it under control with small lifestyle changes, by taking a pain reliever such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), or with physical therapy, you may not need surgery. If, on the other hand, you answer "yes" to the following questions, you may benefit from joint replacement surgery:

- DOES JOINT PAIN MAKE IT HARD FOR YOU TO SLEEP?
- IS THE PAIN KEEPING YOU FROM DOING THINGS YOU WANT TO DO, LIKE VISIT FRIENDS, OR TRAVEL?
- DO EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES, SUCH AS STANDING FROM A SITTING POSITION, OR WALKING UP STAIRS, HURT?

TALK WITH YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER

If your provider thinks you might benefit from joint replacement surgery he or she will refer you to an orthopedic surgeon who performs hip and knee replacement surgery.

EAT RIGHT

Some older adults don't get enough protein, and essential vitamins and minerals in their diets. To boost the odds of a better outcome from surgery, your healthcare provider may suggest that you take nutritional supplements before and after surgery or see a dietician.

ASK ABOUT LESS INVASIVE SUR- GERY

Minimally invasive hip replacement surgery involves fewer and smaller incisions than traditional surgery. Minimally invasive knee replacement surgery involves a smaller cut than the traditional procedure. Patients who have less invasive surgery usually have shorter hospital stays and shorter recoveries. In general, people who are healthier, in better shape, and younger are more likely to be candidates for this surgery than those who are sicker and older. Ask your healthcare provider if you might be a candidate.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE SURGERY

Your surgeon and his or her staff will describe the surgery and the benefits you can expect based on your age and health, and risks. Don't be shy about asking questions. Make sure you understand what the surgery involves, how you should prepare for it, what kind of anesthesia you might need, how long you're likely to be in the hospital, what kind of physical therapy you should get afterward, what your pain management options are, and how long recovery is likely to take.

LIST MEDICATIONS YOU'RE TAKING

Tell your healthcare provider all medications you are taking. Don't forget over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, herbs and other remedies. You may need to stop taking certain medications or supplements before and after surgery. If so, your healthcare provider may recommend substitutes.

QUIT SMOKING

Smoking can prolong healing and recovery after surgery. Talk to your healthcare provider about strategies and programs that can help you quit smoking before your surgery.

EXERCISE

Ask your healthcare provider to recommend safe and appropriate exercises that can help you recover more quickly after surgery. Stretching, aerobic and strength training exercises are often helpful. Strengthening your arms and upper body before surgery can make it easier and more comfortable to use a walker or crutches during recovery.

MAINTAIN A HEALTHY WEIGHT

Some surgeons require patients who weigh more than 300 pounds to lose weight before surgery, since obesity can lengthen recovery. Exercising and eating right can help you slim down if necessary.

MAKE ARRANGEMENTS FOR RECOVERY

Expect to be discharged from the hospital four or five days after surgery. Plan ahead for your recovery by arranging to have a neighbor, friend, relative, or professional caregiver stay at your home for a few days and help with meal preparation, bathing, dressing, and cleaning, until you are comfortable getting around on your own.

There may be some changes in lifestyle, such as keeping items on shelves which won't require bending. Chairs, sofas, or any other type of furniture that sits lower to the ground are not a good idea.

It is also very important to know which medications you need to take, at what doses, and when. And make sure you understand what kind of physical therapy you'll continue to need, for how long, and where and when to get it.

MAKE PHYSICAL THERAPY A PRIORITY

Following your recommended physical therapy is absolutely essential. Patients who do so are less likely to have pain and complications during recovery than those who don't. Those who follow their physical therapy program have been known to walk sooner than those who don't.