

Joint Replacement Surgery

From making the decision to taking steps toward recovery

If you've been living with joint pain, you know how much it can affect your everyday life. Activities you once enjoyed may not be so easy anymore. Perhaps you've stopped doing them altogether.

If joint pain is interfering with your quality of life, your doctor may recommend joint replacement surgery. But is it right for you? If you do have the surgery, what can you expect?

Understanding the Surgery — And Its Benefits

Total joint replacement surgery is an operation to replace an entire joint in the body with an artificial one made of materials such as plastic or metal. In a partial joint replacement, only part of the joint is replaced. Hips and knees are the most commonly replaced joints, but elbows, shoulders, and other joints can be done as well.

"Although joint replacement is considered major surgery, it's also widely successful," says John Tozzi, M.D., of Jersey Shore University Medical Center. Today, people of all ages undergo joint replacement. About 90 percent of them experience dramatically less pain, greater

Cecilia Jones, of Brick, had successful knee replacement surgery. She teaches line and chair dancing, and she recently created a chair-dancing class for seniors who are interested in movement and use assistive devices such as walkers or canes.



mobility, increased ability to do everyday activities, and better overall quality of life.

Making the Decision

The decision to have joint replacement surgery is personal. Some people put it off until they can no longer endure the pain. Others opt to have surgery earlier to continue participating in activities they enjoy. Keep in mind: The right choice for others may not be the best one for you.

“It’s important to discuss joint replacement surgery at length with your doctor,” says Nasser Ani, M.D., of Bayshore Community Hospital. “He or she can help you identify its risks and benefits.” For example, if you have a serious health problem, such as heart disease, your doctor may decide that joint replacement is too difficult for you to handle. Or your doctor may advise having surgery before your mobility becomes limited, which may cause bones and muscles to weaken and can lead to a more difficult surgery and recovery in the future.

Some questions to ask your doctor include:

- What are the risks of surgery? How likely are they?
- How much improvement can I expect?
- What will recovery be like?
- How long will the new joint last?
- What will happen if I don’t have surgery?
 - What other treatments could I try besides surgery?



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Preparing for Surgery

Once you decide to have joint replacement surgery, ask your doctor how best to prepare for it. You have the power to help decrease your risk for complications and improve recovery.

“For example, if you smoke, quitting the habit prior to surgery can lead to much lower rates of complications, including infections,” explains Samuel Epstein, D.O., of Southern Ocean Medical Center. In addition, shedding extra pounds can help relieve undue strain on your joints. This can ease the pain of recovery and get you back to normal activities more quickly.

You’ll need to prepare your home to make it easier to get around after surgery with a walker or cane. For instance, consider placing safety bars and a bench in the shower. Remove loose rugs. And if your bedroom isn’t on the first floor, arrange a temporary bedroom there. “Also, call on your support system to help you in the weeks after surgery with shopping, cleaning, cooking, and other tasks,” adds Dr. Epstein.

What to Expect

Because every surgery is different, it’s important to talk with your doctor about how your specific procedure will be performed. Joint replacement involves removing damaged cartilage

and bone from the joint and replacing them with artificial parts. How these parts are attached can differ from patient to patient based on age, activity level, and bone health.

“In addition, some joint replacement surgeries can be performed using minimally invasive techniques,” explains David Rodricks, M.D., of Ocean Medical Center. “This approach requires a smaller incision and can reduce scarring and speed recovery.”

Getting Back to Life

You’ll probably stay in the hospital for several days after surgery. Once home, you will need to perform special exercises to rebuild your muscles. Also, your doctor will likely send you to a physical therapist who can help you strengthen muscles around the new joint and regain range of motion.

Recovery from joint replacement surgery can be lengthy, lasting from a few weeks to six months or more. “You can keep the process moving by actively participating in your rehabilitation and following your doctor’s treatment plan,” says Dr. Rodricks.

Remember, joint replacement surgery isn’t a decision to take lightly. But it can greatly improve your independence and quality of life. The key is to find an experienced surgeon who can help you make the decision that’s right for you.

Bone Up on Orthopedic Health



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