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How to Prepare for Joint Replacement Surgery

By Fran Kritz

Are you considering joint replacement surgery? If so, you're in good company. The most common joints replaced each year in the United States are hips and knees, and those surgeries appear to be on the rise. A 2019 study published in the *Journal of Rheumatology* estimated that hip replacements could increase 75 percent by 2025, reaching a total of 652,000 procedures. For knee replacement, the projection is an increase of 110 percent by 2025 — or 1.3 million surgeries.

Joint replacement means removing part or all of a damaged joint and replacing it with a prosthetic one. Materials used may include plastic, metal, ceramic, or a combination, says Tamara Huff, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon in Baton Rouge, La., and Columbus, Ga., who is a spokesperson for the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS).

Try Other Options First

When patients first report joint pain to their physician, the

doctor is likely to advise exercise, physical therapy, and pain relief to help deal with the pain and address mobility limitations, says Huff. This is to see if less invasive options are successful, because joint replacements only last about 15 to 20 years, and because any surgery can have complications.

To help make the decision on whether it's time for a new hip or knee (or shoulder), expect imaging tests such as X-rays to see if bone and cartilage in the joints have deteriorated, which is often a tipping point for replacement, as well as how debilitating the pain is and how limited your mobility is, says Stuart Fischer, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon at Overlook Medical Center in Summit, N.J., and a spokesperson for the AAOS.

Risk Factors

Not everyone is a candidate for joint replacement surgery, explains Fischer. For instance, smoking can interfere with wound healing, so some physicians may not perform the surgery on smokers who aren't able to quit.

To improve the chance of

successful surgery, your surgeon may advise some lifestyle changes ahead of joint replacement surgery. “Weight loss, for example, can benefit patients considering knee replacement surgery by decreasing the pressure across the knee joint and reducing pain,” says Huff. It can also improve the longevity of your joint replacement by reducing pressure on the materials.

Huff also notes that controlling diabetes is extremely important for wound healing and preventing infection.

Choosing Your Surgeon

Consumer Reports advises choosing an experienced orthopedic surgeon who frequently does joint replacement surgeries and has a low complication rate. Their benchmark numbers are at least 50 surgeries a year and a complication rate of 3 percent or lower.

The AARP advises considering surgeons recommended by other doctors you rely on, who are approved by your insurer and/or work at a hospital you trust.

Research Your Surgeon's Credentials

The Federation of State Medical Boards runs a free physician search tool for the public at Docinfo.org that provides professional information — such as where a doctor went to medical school, where he or she is licensed, specialty certifications, and any disciplinary actions that have been taken by a licensing board — for more than 1 million licensed physicians in the U.S. The website also includes contact information for each of the boards, as well as information about how to file a complaint.

Consumers' Checkbook, a nonprofit website, provides patient ratings of doctors throughout the country, but charges a fee of \$28 per year. Find it at checkbook.org/national/doctors/

Michael Carome, M.D., director of the Health Research Group at the advocacy organization Public Citizen, recommends asking about the device that will be used

— including how many the surgeon has implanted and how their patients have fared — and then asking the doctor and doing your own research about how long the device has been on the market, and if it has had any problems or recalls.

“Also ask why the doctor is choosing the device and whether the surgeon has a financial relationship with the company that makes the device,” Carome advises.

Carome also recommends getting a second opinion to see whether a different surgeon agrees with your first opinion, including confirming that your situation warrants the surgery, how the surgery will be done (e.g., outpatient vs inpatient), and an assessment of the device being used.

Ask About the Surgery Day and After

Once you've settled on a surgeon, be sure to ask questions about the procedure, says Carome, including everything to expect during your recovery. In the last few years, many

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surgeons have begun doing joint replacement surgeries at outpatient surgery centers with patients going home the same day, says Huff. But if you have health complications, such as a heart condition, you may need to have the surgery in the hospital so that you can be monitored.

Outpatient surgery is more likely to involve local anesthesia rather than being asleep for surgery (general anesthesia), but that can also mean a faster recovery from the effects of anesthesia and a quicker start to becoming more mobile, says Fischer.

Also be sure to ask about pain management for when you get home. Whether the surgery is in or outpatient, says Huff, orthopedic surgeons “no longer just depend on narcotics to manage your post-op pain. In fact, we use very little narcotic pain medication [post-surgery]. We use . . . anti-inflammatory medications, acetaminophen, and other medications to address pain from multiple directions while avoiding the negative side effects of opioid pain medications.”

Prepare Your Home Before Surgery

Paul G. Johnson, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon with TRIA Orthopedics in Minnesota, recommends preparing your home before surgery to reduce the risk of falls and injuries during the month to six weeks you are likely to be recovering. Johnson’s suggestions include creating sleeping and living space for yourself on your home’s main floor; adding bathroom safety rails to any bathrooms you will

be using; removing tripping hazards such as electrical cords, loose rugs, grandchildren’s toys, and other clutter; creating a walking path around furniture for the walker, crutches, or cane you’ll be using for a while after the surgery; and placing items you need within easy reach of your chair and/or bed.

If you won’t always have someone at home to help, look at your kitchen to see what modifications you can make to limit having to balance. This may include measures such as moving knives and appliances you rely on to a counter that you can easily reach. If you haven’t asked for help with meal preparation, consider cooking and freezing some food or ordering through a delivery app to limit how much you have to move around the kitchen.

Lose Weight if You Need to, Cut Back on Intoxicants

Even if you’ve been cleared for surgery, losing any extra weight can make it easier to do the post-surgery exercises and get around on assistive devices such as canes and crutches. Even if you use alcohol and tobacco sparingly, stop before surgery. Tobacco increases the risk for blood clots and can slow wound healing, and alcohol can interact with pain medications.

What to Tell Family and Friends

Relatives and neighbors will often ask to help during surgery and recovery. Among the things you’re likely to need help with, says Johnson, are pet care, errands (such as prescription

pickup), meal preparation, and household chores such as mowing the lawn. If friends ask what they can do to help, suggest that they can deliver meals, send meal gift cards, or heat up food for you in the first weeks after you come home from the hospital. That can be helpful even if you live with someone because you’re sure to need additional help in the first days and weeks after surgery.

Presurgery Appointments

Once surgery is scheduled, the doctor’s office will get in touch about pre-operation appointments. “Be sure to keep those because you will be getting important instructions about the surgery day and how to plan for your recovery,” says Fischer.

You may be able to do some of the visits by phone or video, according to Huff, who says you should expect to talk about all the medications you take, including supplements and over-the-counter products such as baby aspirin. “It is extremely important to tell your surgeon all the medications (prescription and over-the-counter) that you are taking. There are several common supplements, for example, which may cause increased bleeding or interact with medication given before, after, and during your surgery,” she says.

What to Bring With You

Your surgery bag should include a photo ID, insurance card, elastic waistband clothes for the trip home, a cell phone and charger, and headphones if you want to listen to music. □