

PLAYING IT SAFE

Slow return to activity ensures joint replacement success

By David W. Romness, MD



Alexandria resident Carolyn had bilateral hip and knee replacements performed by a Commonwealth Orthopaedics surgeon. She describes her experience: "It's been a very happy experience. I have no pain, I can kneel, and I can walk and walk. This past March I traveled with my three oldest grandchildren to Europe, and I was hauling luggage and walking all over. And I did just fine. I couldn't do that had I not had the surgery. I'm more agile than ever before, and I'm doing all this with no discomfort at all."

In the mid-1970s, a popular TV series chronicled the adventures of "the bionic man," whose mechanical body parts rendered him "better, stronger, faster." As we fast forward to 2006 and channel our attention to medical options for improving our physical health, we find that modern joint replacements return people to action with more realistic expectations.

Joint replacements improve patients' quality of life, allowing people to return to most of the pastimes they enjoyed before their injuries. Newer hip and knee prostheses are stronger with new bearing surfaces, allowing for decreased restriction as well as increased motion in the knee and hip. While joint replacements can make you feel good enough to return to your favorite sport, playing it safe will ensure a successful and lasting replacement.

After any joint replacement, most people are advised to wait three to six months before returning to activities. Returning to athletic activity, in particular, too quickly could result in inflammation, which will put the patient back on the bench. Always start out slowly, gradually increasing the amount of activity.

Choosing Activities Carefully

Choose sports by considering their effects on the new joint. When returning to sports after a hip or knee replacement, steer clear of activities that require impact loading, such as running or jumping. Workouts with less impact, such as skiing on blue runs, golf, doubles tennis, walking, and biking, can help get your body back in shape. Swimming is the best exercise for joints, since it puts the joints in motion without the load.

Sports requiring high flexion, where the knees must be pulled into the chest, may also overtax hip replacements. While aerobics and stretching are allowed, doing a split is obviously too large of a flex. Yoga enthusiasts with hip replacements can return to this relaxing mode of exercise, while modifying certain positions to avoid undue strain on that area. A common misconception is that people with knee replacements should not kneel. It may be uncomfortable, but it is safe.

Contact sports should be avoided because of the possibility of reinjuring or overtaxing the joint replacement. While the new joint is much better than an arthritic or damaged joint, it still isn't as good as the real thing.

Keeping the Joints Moving

If sports are not your game, moving the joints is still mandatory. Real and artificial joints both need activity. Joints are lubricated by motion. Without it, muscles weaken, joints stiffen, and balance problems surface. Therefore, I recommend that all my patients walk for at least 30 minutes per day.

With proper attention to these precautions, most hip and knee implants are successful. According to the American Academy of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation, as baby boomers age, the number of total hip replacements is expected to increase by more than 60% in the next 30 years. More than 80 percent of prostheses are in good working condition 20 years after proper implantation. So sports fans should return to the field, pool, or court to keep in shape, but remember to use proper care and appropriate caution to give your joint replacement a sporting chance. **CO**



David W. Romness, MD, earned his medical degree from Eastern Virginia Medical School and completed his surgical and orthopaedic training at the Mayo Clinic. He is board certified by the American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery. Dr. Romness specializes in joint replacement, including advanced bearing surfaces, computer guidance, small incision surgery, and advanced rehab techniques. He also concentrates on geriatric orthopaedics and the advanced management of hip fractures. In addition to his professional responsibilities, Dr. Romness dedicates time to serving at the Arlington Free Clinic and has participated in medical missions to Honduras.