

Preparing for a Joint Replacement – the importance of “Prehab” as well as Rehab

Joint replacement offers a great benefit to many people when wear and tear and arthritic changes cause significant pain and interfere with function and mobility. Orthopaedic surgeons are experts at these operations and the replacement parts (called prostheses) are very reliable and last many years. However, despite all that, sometimes recovery after the operation is unsatisfactory.

We know that pain and injury to a joint cause weakness of the muscles that act on it and that inactivity leads to disuse atrophy (wasting of the muscle). The main reason for joint replacement is pain and loss of function, so weakness is almost certainly going to be present. When surgery occurs, the necessary trauma to the muscles and joint make it harder, again, for the muscles to work.

If the situation above occurs for a person having a hip or knee replacement, it can be very difficult for the person to “find” the muscles. Pain associated with the operation also inhibits muscle contractions, so post-operative recovery is very slow to start.

That does not have to be the case.

Spending some weeks to months before the surgery doing exercising muscles at the joint to be operated on is time very well spent.

Strength gains made preoperatively mean less strength will be lost during the surgery and, most importantly, familiarity with the exercises means they can be started confidently and effectively. So “pre-hab” is an exercise programme that starts pre-operatively and rehab(ilitation) is the post-operative programme.

Regardless of a person’s level of strength and function, suitable pre-hab exercises can be prescribed. They need not cause any pain, can be progressed as they become easier to do (a sign of increasing strength), and can range from simple bed exercises to bike riding. Preparing like this for a joint replacement increases the likelihood of a successful outcome.

Physiotherapists understand the implications of medical conditions on exercises ability and are experts in prescription of appropriate exercises.

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