

Keywords: joint replacement

Problem: Total joint replacements are safe and reliable therapies. In the United States, orthopedic surgeons perform over 700,000 knee and 500,000 hip replacements annually.

Solution: These surgeries are growing in safety and popularity. However, joint replacement can be unnerving for patients. Information can help ease anxiety and promote confident decision-making. This article highlights 5 things physicians should communicate with their patients about joint replacements.

5 Things Your Patients Should Know About Joint Replacement

In the United States, orthopedic surgeons perform over 700,000 knee and 500,000 hip replacements annually. Joint replacements are safe and reliable therapies commonly used to treat arthritic pain. These surgeries are growing in safety and popularity. However, joint replacement can be unnerving for patients.

Fear of surgical complications or postoperative pain bombards patients with anxiety. They want relief but fear talking to their doctor about options. Information can help ease stress and promote confident decision-making. This article highlights five things patients need to know about joint replacements.

Key Takeaways

- Advanced, end-stage joint disease causes pain that often results in functional decline. Joint replacements improve mobility by reducing pain, inflammation and stiffness.
- When nonsurgical therapies prove ineffective and functional decline continues, patients should consider joint replacement.
- Total and partial joint replacements are both excellent options for deteriorating knees. Patients and providers must consider each surgical type's risks and benefits before deciding.
- During the first six weeks, patients must prioritize pain management and physical therapy while monitoring for inflammation and infection.
- Recovery time depends on the surgical type, technique and presurgical fitness.

When to consider joint replacement

Arthritic pain is the most common motivation for joint replacements. Osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis cause joint stiffness and discomfort, often resulting in disability. Mobility devices, physical therapy, weight loss and pharmaceuticals are excellent initial interventions.

When these nonsurgical therapies prove ineffective, patients should consider joint replacement. Primary care providers are wonderful resources to help patients in the decision-making process. Some things to consider when evaluating surgical readiness include:

- Extent of symptoms
- Impact on quality of life
- Functional decline
- Physical fitness

Various factors impact whether patients are ready for a joint replacement. For many people, joint replacement is a necessary next step. However, poor overall health causes surgeons to pause.

Obesity and smoking increase patients' risk for surgical complications. Physicians should consider prescribing a 6–8-week prehabilitation plan for these individuals. This strategy involves preoperative physical training, nutritional conditioning, psychological support and inspiratory muscle training. Prehabilitation is an evidence-based approach to improve surgical success and postoperative outcomes.

Types of knee replacements

Depending on the extent of joint damage, patients will need a total or partial knee replacement. Patients and providers must weigh the risks and benefits to determine which is best.

Partial knee replacement (PKR)

Surgeons replace the damaged part of the joint during a partial knee replacement. This surgery type is common in younger patients who have experienced a trauma or injury. A partial knee replacement is less invasive, boasting faster recovery and reduced risks. *Though 50% of patients are eligible for partial knee replacements, only 8% choose this type.* After weighing the risks and benefits, many opt for total knee replacement.

Total knee replacement (TKR)

The number of TKRs performed in the U.S. far exceeds that of PKRs. During a total knee replacement, an orthopedic surgeon replaces the entire knee joint by removing the cartilage and resurfacing the joint.

Both total and partial replacements significantly improve the following:

- Mobility
- Pain
- Swelling
- Stiffness

Every surgical intervention has risks and benefits. **Partial joint replacements boast better functional outcomes, but revision rates are higher. TKRs are more extensive and require more rehabilitation, but joint longevity is better.** Decision aids and provider feedback help patients make informed and confident choices.

Postoperative commitment

Recovery takes time. During the first six weeks, patients must prioritize pain management and physical therapy while monitoring for inflammation and infection.

Pain management

Postoperative pain is normal, especially for joint replacements. Surgeons who utilize long-acting medications promote mobility and reduce postoperative narcotic use. During hospitalization, medical staff closely monitor pain levels. This in-hospital support makes staying on top of the pain somewhat easier.

At-home pain management is equally important. **Mounting pain often results in limited activity and increased joint stiffness.** Patients need to understand the importance of sticking to the at-home pain plan.

Inflammation and infection

Surgery inevitably induces inflammation. However, redness, pain and swelling should consistently decrease. **Increasing symptoms may indicate infection; patients do not need to ignore these findings.**

Minimally invasive techniques and postoperative innovations improve recovery and reduce infection rates. Most patients go home with a surgical bandage that can be left on until the follow-up visit. Medical staff perform dressing changes, ensuring the incision site stays clean and dry. These new dressings decrease the risk of infection at the incision site. However, patients must know to leave the dressing on for the bandage to work. The bandage is waterproof so that patients can shower with it on.

Mobility

Physical therapy can be painful. Patients with low pain thresholds often refuse therapy. This choice can have negative implications. Patients who commit to treatment typically experience shorter hospitalizations, improved outcomes and increased mobility. Moving the new joint is

vitality important. **It may initially feel stiff and painful, but movement improves long-term outcomes.** With goal setting and self-advocacy, patients experience improved resilience and recovery.

Expected results and recovery

"How long will it take for me to recover?" This is a common question patients ask. However, recovery time depends on various factors:

- Surgery type: total or partial
- Presurgical health and fitness
- Procedure type: traditional or minimally invasive

Most patients will be able to resume activities approximately six weeks after surgery.

However, they should *anticipate a year for complete recovery*. At that point, most patients can return to a relatively high level of physical activity.

After a year, the pain is typically so much better that many wish they would have had the procedure done sooner. Total joint replacements can last 20 years or more. For many, this surgical intervention is a lifelong solution for arthritic pain.

Improving mobility with quality orthopedic services

Advanced, end-stage arthritis limits mobility and causes painful joint stiffness. Joint replacement surgery is a safe and effective option. Most return to their active, independent life.

Our orthopedic surgeons are knowledgeable and experienced. They are *equipped to perform total or partial joint replacements*. They are experienced in **utilizing traditional or minimally invasive techniques**. If you need quality orthopedic services, let us know. We would be honored to be your partner in care. Click the "Refer" button to contact us today.

Resources

"Joint Replacement Surgery: Health Information Basics for You and Your Family." NIH: National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, 2023, Joint Replacement Surgery: Health Information Basics for You and Your Family | NIAMS.

"Joint Replacement Surgery." American College of Rheumatology, 2024, Joint Replacement Surgery.

"Knee replacement." Mayo Clinic, 2022, Knee replacement - Mayo Clinic.

"Knee Replacement." Cleveland Clinic, 2023, Knee Replacement: Surgery Details & Recovery.