

Orthopaedic Connection

You Can Replace the Elbow?

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

In case you are not up to speed on the latest about elbow replacements, don't feel bad. You have a lot of company.

Total hip replacements were the first joint replacement that was done with any success on a worldwide basis. Dr. John Charnley in England has been given most of the credit.

The knee was a far more difficult joint to replace than the hip, but gradually the knee was perfected too. (Actually way more total knees are done now than total hips.) Then came the ankle and the shoulder.

Elbow replacement began quietly in the 1980's, so it is by no means new. It has generally been reserved for the most severe degenerative or rheumatoid arthritis problems of the elbow. So the number of elbow replacements is dwarfed by the infinitely larger number of hip and knee replacements.

Who Gets One?

- Patients with rheumatoid arthritis make up the largest group. Their disease destroys the joint and makes it almost useless in some cases. Not only doesn't the elbow work right, it can become very deformed.
- Elderly patients who have suffered a severe break in bones in and around the elbow make up the second largest group.
- Osteoarthritis. Few patients with degenerative or wear and tear arthritis are suited for total elbow replacement. It is never the first consideration in a degenerative joint. Why? Because having a new elbow joint puts significant limits on what you can do. Groups one and two accept this, whereas osteoarthritis patients are usually younger, in better shape and want to do more things. The replaced elbow would not last for them.

What Else Might Help?

An alternative surgery is debridement in which I would remove debris such as bone spurs or loose pieces of cartilage in the joint. Some

patients might require a more aggressive procedure, synovectomy, in which the inflamed lining tissue of the elbow joint is removed.

Elbow Replacements Facts

- The elbow is a much smaller joint, which requires a slender implant. The whole design is more fragile than the hip or knee.
- It is demanding surgery that is associated with a high rate of complications including dislocation.
- A new elbow can last 10 - 12 years under ideal circumstances.

As you can tell from our discussion total elbow surgery is never going to overtake the hip and the knee. It may relieve pain, which is very important. It will never approach the durability and function of AML Total Hip Replacement and LCS Total Knee Replacement, which have served my patients well for many years.

As always, we invite our readers wanting to learn more to log onto our office teaching website for patients and families, www.orthopodsurgeon.com, which can take you to Your Orthopaedic Connection for lots more information.

Our goal is simple - To help people return to more pain free, functional lives.

Good health. Good life. All the best to you.

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush