

PATIENT TEACHING AID

Surgery Is the Next Step When Conservative Measures Fail

Knee replacement surgery is necessary when knee pain occurs during normal daily activities such as walking, climbing stairs, rising from a sitting position, or even resting. A sign that surgery may be needed is when an individual finds it difficult or impossible to bend the affected knee. Most people with knee pain and stiffness try conservative measures such as physical therapy, pain medication, corticosteroid injections to relieve inflammation and pain, avoidance of certain activities, or using a cane. When these methods no longer work, surgery is the next option.

About the Surgery

Knee replacement surgery can involve the entire knee joint (total knee replacement) or part of the joint (unicompartmental knee replacement). Some orthopedic surgeons perform a minimally invasive version of the classic knee replacement surgery, allowing faster healing, less pain, and less scar-tissue formation. This procedure requires a smaller incision and causes less trauma to the tendons in the knee joint.

Individuals most likely to require total knee replacement are those over age 65 who have significant osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis of the knee or who have developed arthritis in the joint from a fractured-kneecap injury or torn ligaments. This type of knee surgery is best for older adults because younger people who are physically active can wear out the artificial joint quickly.

Risks and Complications

The most common risks of total knee replacement surgery are blood clots, bleeding, and infection. These risks are possible with every surgery, and steps are taken before and after the procedure to minimize them. If warning signs of these complications are noticed after discharge from the hospital, however, contact the doctor immediately. Signs to watch out for include increased pain, redness, or swelling in the knee, calf or ankle; chest pain; shortness of breath; and cough. Serious complications of knee replacement surgery are rare. The nerves in the knee joint could be injured and result in numbness, the knee joint could become infected, or the replacement joint could loosen or break after surgery.

Recovery and Healing

Total knee replacement surgery requires a hospital stay of 3 to 5 days, depending on the individual's physical condition upon entering the hospital. Blood thinners are prescribed to prevent blood clots, and medication is used to relieve pain. After discharge, physical therapy—some of which can be completed in a rehabilitation facility if needed—usually continues for a month or two. The patient is given strengthening exercises and instructions on how to perform activities so that the joint heals properly. Crutches or a walker may be required for several weeks after surgery, but most people can return to normal activities in 4 to 6 weeks. Some activities, such as running or high-impact sports, must be avoided permanently after total knee replacement surgery.



The best candidates for this surgery are older people with chronic knee pain and stiffness and limited mobility who have unsuccessfully tried other methods to improve their symptoms.