

# 'Tis the Season ...For a New Joint?



By Kristen Wilson, PT, DPT

The holiday season marks an exciting time for many, offering an opportunity to gather with friends and family, give gifts of appreciation, and rekindle traditions of yesteryear. Yet for others, the holiday season may serve as a last hoorah prior to an upcoming joint surgery.

Many people choose to schedule joint replacement surgeries in January and February after the holiday hustle for a variety of reasons, including the ability to meet their medical deductible early in the year, whether that naturally promotes a lower activity level, and the desire to “get it over with” so the rest of the year can be pain-free and fun.

When considering a new joint in the next few months or years, it is prudent to prepare for what to expect following the surgery in order to accelerate your recovery. In addition, proper guidance through the surgical process will prevent the issue from returning, as it is not uncommon for someone to undergo a joint replacement and continue to have problems with pain years after surgery.

When considering a joint replacement, ponder the following questions:

## Why do I need physical therapy? My doctor said I didn't need it.

A few years ago, a notable orthopedic practice in the greater Philadelphia region published a newspaper article indicating that physical therapy following joint replacement wasn't warranted. Instead, he promoted walking and a computer-guided exercise program as a suitable alternative. While this recommendation may work for those with extremely high motivation levels, attuned physical fitness, good knowledge of the rehabilitation process, most people who undergo joint replacement do not succeed in this model for a host of reasons. Physical therapy after joint replacement exists for a reason: most people require customized guidance to return to normal! Physical therapy isn't meant to be a burden after surgery; it's meant to build your strength and accelerate your ability to return to normal function as soon as possible.

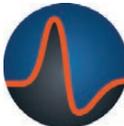
The benefits of post-operative physical therapy include:

- **Professional, hands-on guidance through the exercises necessary to regain your flexibility and strength.** A computer program will not be able to customize your program, nor provide hands-on care and guidance or correct your form.
- **Education about the pain process.** With the current national opioid epidemic raging, it is CRITICAL to have professional guidance about how to manage your pain and, quickly but appropriately, progress away from opioid/narcotic use. A physical therapist will educate you on the pain cycle and other methods to control the pain naturally through techniques and movement.
- **Alleviation of worry and fear.** Your physical therapist is your ally to help you through this process knowledgeably, so that you can rebuild your confidence and mitigate fear from controlling your activities. The number one reason people don't move after surgery is because they're scared they'll do something wrong, and rightfully so! It is an overwhelming process, so take advantage of daily guidance from a professional.

- **Prevention of future issues.** While a joint replacement will remedy your arthritic condition, it may not fix the REASON for your pain, which likely stems from poor body mechanics and unstable joint support due to bad habits. A physical therapist will correct the faulty habits and ensure your joint heals the right way to prevent future pain and dysfunction.
- **An accelerated recovery.** Your physical therapist will customize a program for you that progresses you at your pace towards your goals and encourage you along the way. Last I checked, Siri couldn't do that!

## Do I have to go to the physical therapist my surgeon recommends?

Absolutely not! Just like when choosing a surgeon, you have a choice for your post-operative rehabilitation. Physicians may promote their own physical therapy company because they feel comfortable with



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the communication and quality, but also because they have a vested interest in the financial success of the company. This is not always the case, but it can occur, so it is important to do your research. Certainly, if you have a relationship with a physical therapist that is not affiliated with your surgeon it is your RIGHT to go wherever you choose and are comfortable.

### How long will my recovery take?

This answer varies from person to person but typically most individuals after knee, hip, or ankle replacement return to normal walking and daily tasks within three to five weeks, often are working after four weeks, and can return to sport (depending on the surgery and prior activity level) within 12 to 16 weeks. Swelling is fairly pronounced for the first month, diminishes but is present for about the next four months, and is typically fully resolved in six months. Most people claim that one year post-surgery they feel completely normal in their joint/limb.

### Can I expect to return to normal?

Yes! Medical advancements in surgery and rehabilitation have greatly progressed the outcomes of joint replacements, and many people return to even higher levels of function that before their surgery. My mom, who hadn't played tennis in 10 years due to knee pain, recently told me she joined her local tennis club and was back on the court after knee replacement! Anything is possible with the right guidance and motivation.

So this holiday season raise a glass to your health and wellbeing as you consider future joint replacement. With proper guidance, your recovery will result in a stronger and happier you. It will likely be your best gift of the year!

*Happy Holidays from the Action Potential family!*

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