Advances in medical care and healthier lifestyles mean that we are living progressively longer lives. We are constantly being advised how to look after our bodies and minds with our way of life and the food we eat but what about our joints? Inevitably a lifetime of walking upright, doing physical work and participating in sport will lead to wearing of our joint surfaces, giving us pain, stiffness and a lack of mobility. Fortunately, technology and research is helping to solve these problems and we can very successfully replace many joints in the body.

Why might I need a new joint – what is arthritis?
Strictly speaking, osteoarthritis is not a very accurate term, it is a degenerative condition which happens to everyone’s joint surfaces, to a greater or lesser extent, with time. In contrast, rheumatoid arthritis is a true inflammatory condition which usually affects multiple joints. The end result for both groups is similar, that is, destruction of the ‘articular’ surfaces covering the ends of the bones.

What is a joint replacement?
Basically, the surgeon will remove the worn joint surfaces and replace them with a metal and/or plastic component. In the hip it may be necessary to remove the whole head of the thigh bone and replace it with a metal one. The knee can be divided into three separate compartments – just one or all of which may need replacing.

Joint Replacements

Following surgery:
The average length of stay in hospital is approximately 3/5 days but this will vary depending on your surgeon and how you are. By the time you go home you will hopefully have achieved 90° of bend, be walking independently with sticks or crutches, and be safely able to negotiate stairs.

Preparing for surgery:
It is important to keep yourself fit and healthy before your operation, this will help you recover more quickly. Try to maintain as much movement and strength in your legs as possible and try to lose those extra pounds if you have them.
Unfortunately, your operation is only the beginning. Rehabilitation is essential to enable you to gain the best potential from your new joint. Hard work is ahead but it is also important to remember that healing takes time – nature cannot be hurried but can be assisted!
This is a bony operation and bone in the leg takes approx 3 months to heal. This doesn’t mean you will be incapacitated for this length of time, mobility will gradually increase week by week but during this initial period nature will tell you when enough is enough – you will be wise to listen.

During the initial phases, exercise should be little and often, 5-10 minutes of exercise 5/6 times a day is better than 40 mins in one go. Activities such as walking about the house, standing or pottering are also exercise and should be interspersed with formal exercises and REST.

By approximately 3 months you will be largely back to normal activities but improvement goes on for at least a year.

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