Joint Reconstruction for Rheumatoid Arthritis

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Arthroplasty for RA

Rheumatoid arthritis is a degenerative disease, and so most patients will find that joint pain and function worsen as the years go by. When a regime of medicine and therapy is unable to slow the disease progression and the symptoms, some joints may fall into such severe disrepair that the pain is unbearable and most function is lost. In these cases, physicians will consider arthroplasty to rebuild the joint and help relieve pain and discomfort. Ultimately, the procedure aims to restore function and range of motion, and in turn, muscle strength and support. So it may be time to resort to arthroplasty for RA.

How Arthroplasty Works

Arthroplasty for Rheumatoid arthritis is a surgical procedure to realign, reconstruct or replace the areas of the joint that have degraded. In some cases, bones in the joint will need to be reshaped to allow for easier motion. In other cases, a man-made part, or prosthesis, will need to be inserted to replace the parts that have worn away.

Although bone or tissue transplants were once popular approaches to arthroplasty for RA, surgeons now favor plastic or metal parts that can live up to the wear and tear of everyday living. The specific device, material, or procedure you receive will depend on several factors, including:

- The particular part of the joint that has degraded.
- Whether you have already had surgery for the affected area.
- How much function has been lost?

Since arthroplasty won't stop the progression of rheumatoid arthritis or eliminate all your symptoms, it is a remedy rather than a cure. Only when medicine, therapy, and exercise have failed to bring good results will your doctor consider an invasive procedure like joint replacement.

Risks of Joint Replacement Surgery

Like any surgery, arthroplasty for RA will bring some risks. Luckily, otherwise, healthy patients will have a low risk of complications, but it is important to keep in mind some potential problems that could arise before, during, and after the procedure, such as:

- Anesthetic problems.
- Blood clots following the procedure, or internal bleeding.
- Infection developing in the artificial joint. If this does occur, a second surgical procedure will likely be needed to remove the joint and treat the infection.
- Loosening of the prosthetic joint.

What to Expect for Recovery and Beyond

Arthroplasty for RA will require a stay in the hospital, anywhere from a few days up to two weeks. Your doctors will monitor your recovery, and a physical therapist will have you begin an exercise regime almost immediately. You must keep moving your new joint and strengthen the muscles around it to reap the full rewards of your reconstruction, so you'll have medication to control any pain while you continue your daily exercise.

Although it can't cure everything, arthroplasty for RA can do quite a bit for severe or advanced cases. You will likely experience less pain, and you will regain enough function to perform a wide range of everyday activities. The quality of life will greatly improve for the vast majority of RA patients who undergo arthroplasty, although a small percentage of arthroplasty cases may need a second surgical procedure in the future.