

AVERAGE AGE OF PARTIAL AND TOTAL KNEE REPLACEMENT DROPPING



by Rodney Henderson, MD

Active, aging baby boomers have shifted the average age of knee replacements from that of a decade ago. In 1999, the majority of people seeking out partial and total knee replacements included those over the age of 65. Now, 10 years later, a trend across the United States shifts the average age to younger than 65 years old. In fact, the average age for a partial knee replacement patient is between 45 and 65.

In most cases, wear and tear on joints and osteoarthritis motivates patients to initially seek out joint replacement surgery. Among baby boomers, torn ligaments from old sports injuries and damaged cartilage may be the root cause of the pain, although genetics, obesity and a misalignment of bones could also be at work. Several other reasons contribute to this growing, younger patient population.

REASONS BEHIND THE TREND

For one, younger people tend to lead more active lives. Many patients participate in sports and other activities and are still out in the workplace. Baby boomers typically seek help after developing arthritis and can no longer live with the pain. They can't sleep, they're on pain medications, and they simply want to return to their busy lifestyle and to work as soon as possible.

Plus, new, longer-lasting implant technology makes knee replacement surgery a more popular option. Replacement joints used to last between 10 and 15 years, so a 65-year-old patient would be 80 before the joint wore out. At that age, the

patient would likely be a low-demand (i.e., not very active) patient. New materials produce joints predicted to last up to 30 years — good news for an athletic 45-year-old who plans to remain active.

OUTPATIENT OPTIONS

Minimally invasive surgical techniques and improvement in pain management are allowing surgeries that were usually done at the hospital to be done as outpatient procedures, including major joint replacements. Patients can return home that day or stay overnight, whether it be a partial/total knee or hip replacement.

The lower cost of outpatient surgery also plays a role. Many patients in this younger age group not in the Medicare population must cover a large percentage of the surgery on their own. Outpatient surgery centers can significantly lower this out-of-pocket cost plus deliver better treatment, result in a lower infection rate and offer more personalized care.

Younger patients also do not typically have issues such as heart disease and blood-pressure issues that require management. Those over the age of 65 usually spend more time in the hospital and do not go straight home after surgery but first spend time in an extended-care facility. Younger people with a good family support system prefer to recover at home, which helps them psychologically.

Today's knee and hip replacement surgeries have patients back to work in three weeks and back to golfing in six to eight weeks, depending on the patient's motivation. Today's younger patients no longer need to worry about the future if they're in need of knee replacement surgery. New technology and outpatient surgery options give patients better options.

