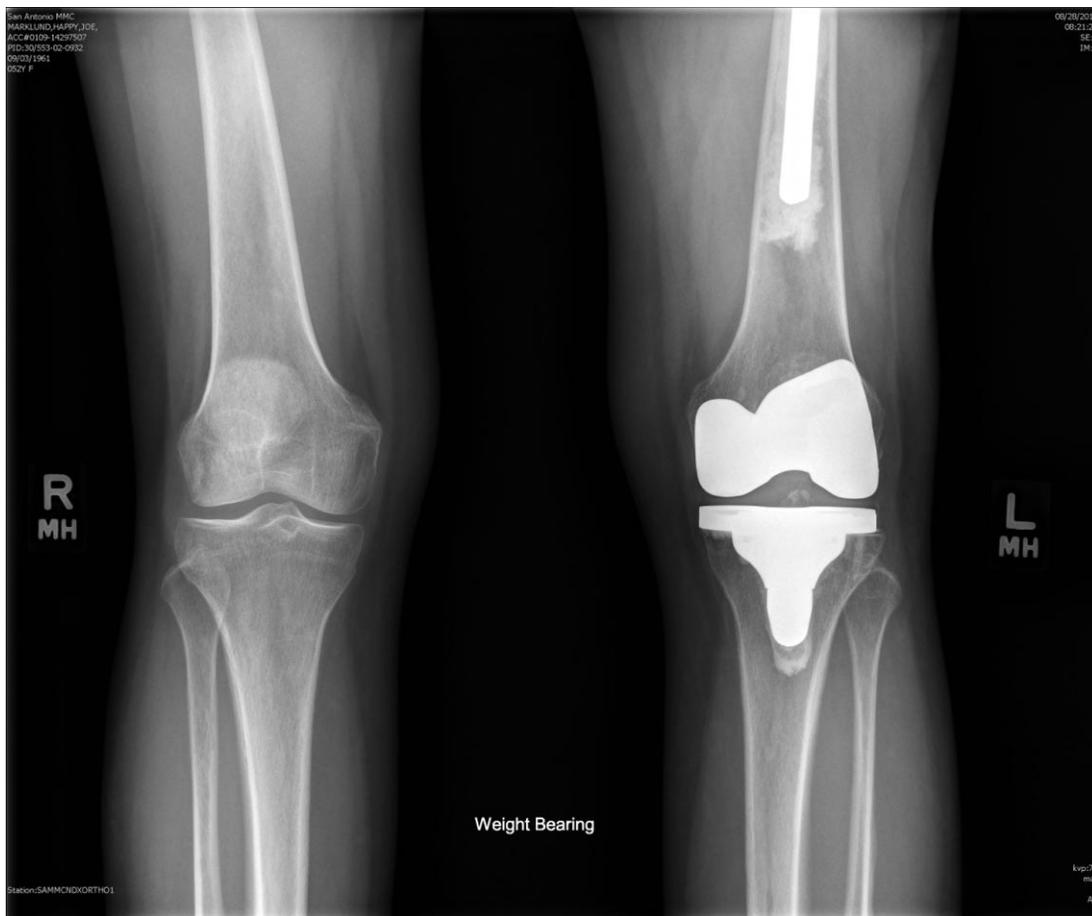


DR SIRAJ A. SAYEED
SOUTH TEXAS BONE AND JOINT INSTITUTE
5510 PRESIDIO PARKWAY, STE 400
SAN ANTONIO, TX 78249
PHONE: (210) 696-2663



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A Patient's Guide to Artificial Joint Replacement of the Knee



Introduction

A painful knee can severely affect your ability to lead a full, active life. Over the last 25 years, major advancements in artificial knee replacement have improved the outcome of the surgery greatly. Artificial knee replacement surgery (also called *knee arthroplasty*) is becoming increasingly common as the population of the world begins to age.

This guide will help you understand

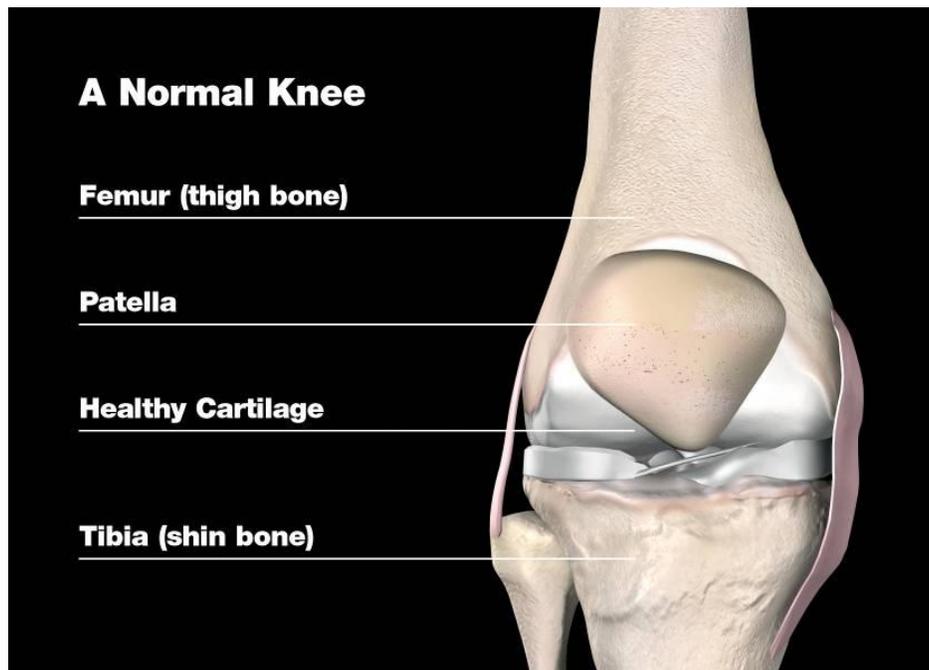
- what your doctor hopes to achieve with knee replacement surgery
- what happens during the procedure
- what to expect after your operation

Anatomy

What is the normal anatomy of the knee?

The knee joint is formed where the thighbone (*femur*) meets the shinbone (*tibia*). A smooth cushion of *articular cartilage* covers the surface ends of both of these bones so that they slide against one another smoothly. The articular cartilage is kept slippery by joint fluid made by the joint lining (*synovial membrane*). The fluid is contained in a soft tissue enclosure around the knee joint called the *joint capsule*.

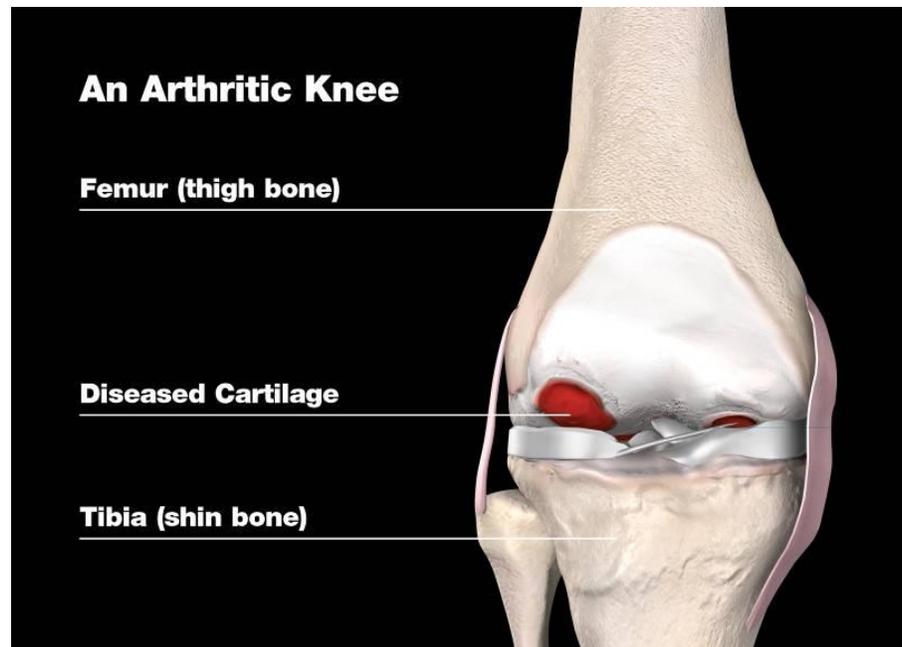
The *patella*, or kneecap, is the moveable bone on the front of the knee. It is wrapped inside a tendon that connects the large muscles on the front of the thigh, the quadriceps muscles, to the lower leg bone. The surface on the back of the patella is covered with articular cartilage. It glides within a groove on the front of the femur.



Rationale

What does the doctor hope to achieve with surgery?

When the cartilage degenerates, or “wears off”, the joint becomes arthritic. This can happen for a number of reasons, but, regardless of the cause, there is no way to replace the cartilage or reverse the arthritic process in the joint. The main reason for replacing any arthritic joint with an artificial joint is to stop the degenerative surfaces from rubbing against each other and causing pain. Replacing the painful and arthritic joint with an artificial joint gives the joint a new surface, which moves smoothly and without causing pain. The goal is to help people return to many of their activities with less pain and with greater freedom of movement.



Preparation

How should I prepare for surgery?

The decision to proceed with surgery should be made jointly by you and your doctor. The decision should only be made after you understand the treatment options, risks, benefits and possible complications of the procedure.

Once you decide to proceed with surgery, several things may need to be done. Your orthopedic surgeon may suggest a complete physical examination by your medical or family doctor. This is to ensure that you are in the best possible condition to undergo the operation. You may also need to spend time with the physical therapist who will be managing your rehabilitation after the surgery. The therapist will begin the teaching process before surgery to ensure that you are ready for rehabilitation afterwards.

One purpose of the preoperative visit is to record a baseline of information. This includes measurements of your current pain levels, functional abilities, the presence of swelling, and the available movement and strength of each knee.

A second purpose of the preoperative therapy visit is to prepare you for your upcoming surgery. You will practice some of the exercises used just after surgery. You will also be trained in the use of either a walker or crutches. Finally, an assessment will be made of any needs you will have at home once you're released from the hospital.

You will need to see your dentist to have a complete examination of your mouth. This is to ensure that you don't have any dental infections that may put your knee replacement at risk of infection. A letter from your dentist will need to be brought to your orthopedic surgeons office to confirm that you are clear from dental infections.

Surgical Procedure

What happens during the operation?

Before we describe the procedure, let's look first at the artificial knee itself.

The Artificial Knee

There are two major types of artificial knee replacements:

- [cemented prosthesis](#)
- [uncemented prosthesis](#)

Both are still widely used. In many cases a combination of the two types is used. The patellar (kneecap) portion of the prosthesis is commonly cemented into place. The decision to use a cemented or uncemented artificial knee is usually made by the surgeon based on your age, your lifestyle, and the surgeon's experience.



Each prosthesis is made up of three main parts:

The tibial component (bottom portion) replaces the top surface of the lower bone, the tibia.

The femoral component (top portion) replaces the bottom surface of the upper bone (the femur) and the groove where the patella fits.

The patellar component (kneecap portion) replaces the surface of the patella where it glides in the groove on the femur.

The femoral component is made of metal. The tibial component is usually made of two parts--a metal tray that is attached directly to the bone and a plastic spacer that provides the slick surface. The plastic used is so tough and slick that you could ice skate on a sheet of it without damaging the material much. The patellar component is usually made of plastic as well. In some types of knee implants, the patellar component is made of a combination of metal and plastic.

A cemented prosthesis is held in place by a type of epoxy cement that attaches the metal to the bone. An uncemented prosthesis has a fine mesh of holes on the surface that allows bone to grow into the mesh and attach the prosthesis to the bone.

The Operation

To begin the procedure, the surgeon makes an incision on the front of the knee to allow access to the joint. Several different approaches can be used to make the incision. The choice is usually based on the surgeon's training and preferences.

Once the knee joint is opened, a special positioning device (a *cutting guide*) is placed on the end of the femur. This cutting guide is used to ensure that the bone is cut in the proper alignment to the leg's original angles--even if the arthritis has made you bowlegged or knock-kneed. With the help of the cutting guide, [the surgeon cuts several pieces of bone from the end of the femur](#). The artificial knee will replace these worn surfaces with a metal surface.

Next, the surface of the tibia is prepared. Another type of cutting guide is used to [cut the tibia](#) in the correct alignment.

Then the [articular surface of the patella is removed](#).

The [metal femoral component](#) is then placed on the femur. In the uncemented prosthesis, the metal piece is held snugly onto the femur because the femur is tapered to accurately match the shape of the prosthesis. The metal component is pushed onto the end of the femur and held in place by friction. In the cemented variety, epoxy cement is used to attach the metal prosthesis to the bone.

The metal tray that holds the plastic spacer is then attached to the top of the tibia. This metal tray is either cemented into place, or held with screws if the component is of the uncemented variety. The screws are primarily used to hold the tibial tray in place until bone grows into the porous coating. (The screws remain in place and are not removed.)

The plastic spacer is then attached to the metal tray of the tibial component. If this component should wear out while the rest of the artificial knee is sound, it can be replaced.

The surgeon then sizes the [patellar component](#) and puts it into place behind the patella. This piece is usually cemented in place.

Finally, the soft tissues are sewn back together. The skin is closed with either staples or suture.

Complications

What might go wrong?

As with all major surgical procedures, complications can occur. This document doesn't provide a complete list of the possible complications, but it does highlight some of the most common problems. Some of the most common complications following artificial knee replacement are

- anesthesia complications
- thrombophlebitis
- infection
- stiffness
- loosening

Anesthesia Complications

Most surgical procedures require that some type of anesthesia be done before surgery. A very small number of patients have problems with anesthesia. These problems can be reactions to the drugs used, problems related to other medical complications, and problems due to the anesthesia. Be sure to discuss the risks and your concerns with your anesthesiologist.

Thrombophlebitis (blood clots)

Thrombophlebitis, sometimes called deep venous thrombosis (DVT), can occur after any operation, but is more likely to occur following surgery on the hip, pelvis, or knee. DVT occurs when blood clots form in the large veins of the leg. This may cause the leg to swell and become warm to the touch and painful.

If the blood clots in the veins break apart, they can travel to the lung, where they lodge in the capillaries and cut off the blood supply to a portion of the lung. This is called a *pulmonary embolism*. (*Pulmonary* means lung, and *embolism* refers to a fragment of something traveling through the vascular system.)

Most surgeons take preventing DVT very seriously. There are many ways to reduce the risk of DVT, but probably the most effective is getting you moving as soon as possible after surgery.

Some of the other commonly used preventative measures include

- pressure stockings to keep the blood in the legs moving
- medications that thin the blood and prevent blood clots from forming

Infection

Infection can be a very serious complication following an artificial joint surgery. The chance of getting an infection following artificial knee replacement is roughly one percent or less. Some infections may show up very early--even before you leave the hospital. Others may not become apparent for months, or even years, after the operation. Infection can spread into the artificial joint from other infected areas. Your surgeon may want you to take antibiotics when you have dental work or surgical procedures to reduce the risk of spreading germs to the joint.

Stiffness

In some cases, the ability to bend the knee does not return to normal after knee replacement surgery. To be able to use the leg effectively to rise from a chair, the knee must bend at least to 90 degrees. A desirable range of motion is greater than 110 degrees.

The most important factor in determining range of motion after surgery is the motion before surgery. During the procedure, the surgeon's goal is to "balance" the knee well and place the knee in good alignment, so that there is equal tension on all the ligaments and soft tissues.

Sometimes extra scar tissue develops after surgery and can lead to an increasingly stiff knee. If this occurs, your surgeon may recommend taking you back to the operating

room, placing you under anesthesia once again, and manipulating the knee to regain motion. Basically, this allows the surgeon to break up and stretch the scar tissue without you feeling it. The goal is to increase the motion in the knee without injuring the joint.

Loosening

The major reason that artificial joints eventually fail continues to be a process of loosening where the metal or cement meets the bone. Great advances have been made in extending how long an artificial joint will last, but most will eventually loosen and require a revision. Hopefully, you can expect 12 to 15 years of service from an artificial knee, but in some cases the knee will loosen earlier than that. A loose prosthesis is a problem because it usually causes pain. Once the pain becomes unbearable, another operation will probably be required to revise the knee replacement.

After Surgery

What happens after surgery?

You will have physical therapy each day as long as you are in the hospital. Therapy treatments will address the range of motion in the knee. Gentle movement will be used to help you bend and straighten the knee. Your leg may be elevated to help drain extra fluid in the leg.

Your therapist will also go over exercises to help improve knee mobility and to start exercising the thigh and hip muscles. Ankle movements are used to help pump swelling out of the leg and to prevent the possibility of a blood clot.

Your therapist will also help you begin putting full weight on the knee the day of surgery. You will use crutches or a walker as needed.

Most patients are able to go home after spending one to two days in the hospital. You'll be on your way home when you are cleared by the Therapist, can tolerate food and water well, and your pain is controlled with pills only. Patients who need extra care may be sent to a rehabilitation facility until they are safe to go home.

Most orthopedic surgeons recommend regular checkups after your artificial joint replacement. Initially, you will be seen for a wound check at 14 days, and your motion will be checked at 2 weeks, 6 weeks, 3 months and 6 months after surgery. Thereafter, you will need annual follow-up with x-rays. Your goal range of motion should be 90 degrees by 2 weeks and 120 degrees by 6 weeks. You should always consult your orthopedic surgeon if you begin to have pain in your artificial joint, or if you begin to suspect something is not working correctly.

Most patients who have an artificial joint will have episodes of pain, but when you have a period that lasts longer than a couple of weeks you should consult your doctor. The surgeon will examine your knee in search of reasons for the pain. X-rays may be taken of your knee to compare with X-rays taken earlier to see whether the artificial joint shows any evidence of loosening.

Rehabilitation

What should I expect during my rehabilitation?

Once discharged from the hospital, you will see a Therapist 2-3 times per week for 6 weeks. This is to ensure you are regaining your motion. Your therapist will make recommendations about your safety, review your exercise program, and continue working with you on knee range of motion. In some cases you may require additional visits at home before beginning outpatient physical therapy. Home therapy visits end when you can safely leave the house.

Visits to the physical therapist's office come next. Your therapist may use heat, ice, or electrical stimulation to reduce any remaining swelling or pain. **The most important exercise after total knee replacement is riding a bicycle. This can begin 14 days after surgery once you visit your orthopedic surgeon and the incision is found to be healed.**

You should continue to use your walker or crutches as instructed, but can put full weight on the knee. You will be advanced to walking without assistive devices as soon as you can safely do so.

Your therapist may use hands-on stretches for improving range of motion. Strength exercises address key muscle groups including the buttock, hip, thigh, and calf muscles. Endurance can be achieved through stationary biking, lap swimming, and using an upper body ergometer (upper cycle).

Therapists sometimes treat their patients in a pool. Exercising in a swimming pool puts less stress on the knee joint, and the buoyancy lets you move and exercise easier. Once you've gotten your pool exercises down and the other parts of your rehab program advance, you may be instructed in an independent program.

When you are safe in putting full weight through the leg, several types of balance exercises can be chosen to further stabilize and control the knee.

Finally, a select group of exercises can be used to simulate day-to-day activities, such as going up and down steps, squatting, rising on your toes, and bending down. Specific exercises may then be chosen to simulate work or hobby demands.

Most patients have less pain and better mobility after having knee replacement surgery. Your therapist will work with you to help keep your knee joint healthy for as long as possible. This may require that you adjust your activity choices to keep from putting too much strain on your new knee joint. Heavy sports that require running, jumping, quick stopping or starting, and cutting are discouraged. Cycling, swimming, and level-walking are encouraged, as are low impact sports like golfing or bowling.

The therapist's goal is to help you improve knee range of motion, maximize strength, and improve your ability to do your activities. When you are well underway, regular visits to the therapist's office will end. The therapist will continue to be a resource, but you will be in charge of doing your exercises as part of an ongoing home program.

As with total hip replacement surgery, there is never any impact activities allowed after total knee replacement. This includes any activities that have running or jumping associated with them. Some activities that are OK to return to after total knee replacement are: walking, hiking, swimming, golfing, bowling, fishing, doubles tennis, and riding a bicycle. Please consult your orthopedic surgeon prior to returning to activities to make sure they are allowed after total knee replacement.