



HealthTALK

Degenerative Ankle Arthritis

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The debilitating pain and loss of motion associated with ankle arthritis forces thousands of people each year to seek orthopedic treatment. Of the more than 100 types of arthritis, degenerative arthritis is by far the most common type affecting the ankle joint. In the healthy ankle, a specialized cartilage covers and cushions the bone surfaces. The bony surfaces are able to glide across each other to allow full and painless range of motion. When arthritis interferes, this cartilaginous covering can wear away. The bones in the ankle begin to rub against each other producing pain, swelling and restriction of motion.

Many patient's symptoms are successfully alleviated with activity modification, bracing, inflammation reducing medications and steroid injections into the affected joint. Patients whose symptoms are not responsive to these non-operative measures may require surgical intervention. Surgical treatment is performed for the permanent reduction of pain and to improve the patient's quality of life. The two long term surgical options for advanced ankle arthritis are ankle fusion (arthrodeses) and ankle replacement surgery.

For many years, the preferred surgical treatment for advanced degenerative or rheumatoid arthritis of the ankle has been ankle fusion. Originally developed over 100 years ago, fusion has been utilized to alleviate pain, correct deformity and restore stability. In fusion surgery, the degenerative tissues are removed; the bones of the ankle are then locked

together in a fixed position thereby preventing any up and down motion. After successful fusion of the ankle joint, patients usually walk with a near normal gait and without the agonizing pain caused by their arthritic ankle. Ankle fusion is indicated in young patients with high functional demands, in patients with significant ankle deformity, in patients who have had previous or recent infection in the ankle, and in those who have a neurologic condition which prevents normal muscular control or sensation of the ankle and foot.

While long term studies demonstrate that ankle fusion can provide a lifetime of painless function, other studies have described potential unintended, adverse effects as well. Orthopedic surgeons have found that after successful fusion of the ankle, the stresses of walking and standing are transferred or shifted from the ankle to the other 30 joints in the foot in an unnatural way. Over time, these additional stresses can produce degenerative changes resulting in pain, swelling and loss of mobility in the foot. Eventually, the joints in the foot may become so painful that fusion of these joints will be required. The combination of foot and ankle fusion produces an extremely stiff foot with dramatic changes in the way we normally walk.

Spurred by the long term success of hip and knee replacement and realizing the limitations and potential complications of ankle fusion, orthopedic surgeons have long experimented with the possibility of ankle replacement as a viable treatment for advanced ankle arthritis.

While early implant designs in the 1970's and 80's failed to meet expectations and hopes, the implants for ankle replacement available today are demonstrating promising results. Modern day ankle replacement surgery provides pain relief and closely matches normal ankle function with cusseses similar to hip and knee replacement surgery.

Ankle replacement surgery requires removing diseased and damaged joint tissues then inserting implants made of state of the art materials. The gliding surfaces of these implants allow for mobility and eliminate the painful symptoms of arthritis. The usual hospital stay is two or three days in most patients. Ankle replacement recipients begin full weight bearing on the involved leg in a few weeks without the need of braces or extensive physical therapy.

As with any joint replacement ankle impact surgery is typically reserved for more mature patients with low activity demands. However, orthopedic surgeons are successfully replacing arthritic ankles in younger patients with multiple joint arthritis, and even in patients who have had previous successful ankle fusion surgery.

For patients who suffer from the pain and immobility or ankle arthritis, each step can be agonizing while preventing full enjoyment of life's many riches. Many symptoms are successfully alleviated with medications, braces and activity modification. For those who continue to suffer despite these means, surgery either via ankle replacement or by ankle infusion can give a new lease to a pain free life.



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