Ahead of exploring surgery, there are a variety of other treatment options available for osteoarthritis (OA), spanning physiotherapy, exercise, weight management, and medication. However, if you've exhausted alternative options and are still seeking relief, you might be pondering if surgery is right for you. This resource intends to aid you in conversing with your doctor about when surgery may be suitable, along with the associated risks and benefits.

1. Am I ready for joint surgery?

If significant OA is present, opting for surgery might depend on your pain level and the extent to which it restricts your daily activities. Ask yourself:

- Do you need help to complete daily tasks due to your osteoarthritis?
- Does your pain keep you up at night despite medication or other sleep aids?
- Has your pain worsened recently?
- Have you tried all other non-surgical treatment options?
- Is it too challenging to get up from a chair or climb stairs?
- Does your doctor believe other treatment options won't be effective?
- Do you struggle to manage the side effects of your medication?
- Are you committed to the required pre- and post-surgical therapies?

If you responded “Yes” to all the above questions, it might be time to consult your doctor about surgery. If you answered “No” to any of the questions, surgery may still be an option, but additional factors should be considered.

2. When is surgery not appropriate?

If your pain isn’t limiting your normal activities, or it can be managed with medication or therapy, or if your pain permits you to perform daily activities like walking and shopping, surgery may not be necessary. Surgery may also not be advisable for individuals with:

- Poor general health
- Active infection or high risk of developing infection (e.g., smokers, have uncontrolled diabetes, are immunocompromised, or are very obese and have not attempted weight-loss)
- Severe muscle weakness that would make it hard for muscles to support the new joint

On the other hand, delaying surgery until you’ve already lost a lot of your strength, flexibility, and ability to perform daily tasks can make returning to normal activities more challenging after surgery. “Surgery is best done when your pain is limiting, but not disabling and when your function is limited, but you are still capable of improvement” (“When is hip surgery necessary?” Sunnybrook Hospital, 2018).

Doctors may not recommend surgery for:

- Poor general health
- Active infection or high risk of developing infection (e.g., patients who are smokers, have uncontrolled diabetes, are immunocompromised, or are very obese and have not attempted weight-loss)
- Severe muscle weakness that would make it hard for muscles to support the new joint

Before making any decision, ensure you have a thorough discussion with your healthcare provider.
3. Benefits and risks of surgery

Benefits can include:

- Reduced pain
- Improved ability to stand, walk and/or move
- Increased ability to do daily activities
- Return to low-impact recreational activities (e.g. swimming, cycling, golf)
- Lifetime use of new joint with proper weight management, joint protection and regular exercise/activity

Risks can include:

- Ongoing pain in the affected joint
- Premature wearing of the new joint and the need for a revision
- Post surgical complications including blood clots, infection, fracture, bleeding, nerve injury, limp, joint stiffness, wound healing problems
- Loosening of the implant that makes revision surgery necessary

4. What’s next?

Surgery isn’t for everyone – it’s always up to what you decide in discussion with your doctor. Consider everything surgery will involve, including preparation and rehabilitation. You need to be an active participant in your recovery and have patience in the process. You can also consider getting a second opinion before making the decision.

If you think you’re ready for surgery, make an action plan with your physician. Discuss which implants to use, the surgery process, the risks to be aware of and your plan for recovery and rehabilitation. Planning in advance will make for a smoother recovery and likely a better outcome.

Sources

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