

Orthopaedic Connection

Severe Ankle Arthritis: Replacement Tops Fusion

By Thomas J. Haverbush, M.D.
Orthopaedic Surgeon

Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

While knees and hips get most of the attention, arthritis in the ankle joint can be just as painful. It can also cause great functional disability.

Muscles supporting the ankle joint get weaker, stiffness begins to set in and structures that absorb shock lose their capacity.

Cause

Ankle problems are especially prevalent among those who have injured or broken their ankle. Patients with rheumatoid arthritis have a very high incidence of foot and ankle problems. I rarely see ankle arthritis that does not have one of these two causes. Contrast this with a much larger number of patients with hip and/or knee arthritis who have no known cause. The hip or knee joint seems destined to wear out. Why don't we see a lot more ankle arthritis than we do with no known cause? No one knows.

Conservative Treatment for Mild to Moderate Arthritis

Anyone who suffers from arthritis of the ankle should not go looking for surgery first because there are other options to explore.

- Weight loss. If a person is overweight it puts huge wear and tear stress on the poor ankle.
- Exercise on a bike (regular or stationary).
- Swim if available.
- Use a cane in the opposite hand.
- Motrin, Advil or similar.
- Prescription anti-inflammatory medication
- Physical Therapy.
- Steroid injection directly into the joint.

Aggressive Treatment

I fully realize there are many patients who do not want to bother with weight reduction and exercise. They do however, wish to be more comfortable and be able to do more.

Arthroscopic Surgery is chosen if the arthritis is not too advanced. This will not of course cure the arthritis, but can clean the joint, remove debris and insert medication.

Ankle Fusion

Ankle fusion or making the joint solid has long been the traditional treatment for end stage arthritis. It is effective for relief of pain and to improve function, but you will definitely limp with an ankle fusion. It results in stiffness that sacrifices the up and down motion of the ankle we use in everyday activities. Because the ankle joint can't move freely after fusion other joints are forced to compensate and move more than normal during

walking. This can stress those joints and lead to arthritis elsewhere. Even with these drawbacks, ankle fusion is a good alternative for people who cannot have a total ankle replacement.

Dang. Out of space again. Oh well, I did want to spend enough time to cover total ankle replacement thoroughly so lets stop here and pick up next week with all you need to know about total ankle surgery.

My patients put their trust in me and what I do improves the quality of their lives.

Office Website and Gratiot County Herald Archive

Wow! Your window to the Orthopaedic and musculoskeletal world opens at www.orthopodsurgeon.com. It contains 1) The Website Library of Information 2) Your Orthopaedic Connection 3) GCH Archive of all previous articles.

You will be amazed at all the helpful information it contains.

All of the information pertains to everything I treat in the office and hospital.

Be well. Good health, good life, all the best to you.

Dr. Haverbush