A Walk in the Park

After spending a winter on the sofa, Alice decided she’d had enough. The 70-year-old from Manassas was tired of “gimping around” with worsening osteoarthritis in her hip. The painful condition made everyday activities challenging and interfered with her quality of life. She knew it was time for a hip replacement.

Alice did not come to this decision lightly. In fact, she did everything she could to postpone surgery. She tried over-the-counter painkillers. Then she tried prescription medication. She tried moving more. Then she tried moving less. Nothing helped.

Finally, she returned to OrthoVirginia surgeon Brantley Vitek, MD, who had diagnosed her condition one year earlier. “I’d spent so many hours out of commission and by now I had excruciating pain with every step I took,” she recalled. “I told Dr. Vitek ‘I’m not going to put up with this anymore. I’m ready for a replacement.’”

Hip arthritis occurs when cartilage in the hip joint gradually erodes. Without the cushioning effect, the bones rub together and the hip becomes stiff, swollen and painful. Also called “wear and tear” arthritis, osteoarthritis is a progressive, degenerative disease in which the surface layer of cartilage slowly wears away. The disease is especially common among middle-aged and older adults.

“Patients with osteoarthritis are encouraged to try non-operative options, such as weight loss, activity modification, physical therapy and medication, to alleviate symptoms,” Dr. Vitek explains. “If these fail to bring relief, hip replacement surgery is a safe and effective procedure to relieve pain and help people resume normal activities.”

During total hip replacement, the surgeon removes the damaged femoral head (the rounded end of the upper thighbone) and cartilage from the hip socket. The femoral head is replaced with a metal or ceramic ball that is fixed solidly to a metallic stem inserted into the upper part of the femur (thighbone). The socket is usually replaced with a plastic liner fixed into a metal shell. This new artificial ball-and-socket assembly creates a painless, cushioning effect much like the original cartilage in the hip.
The standard of care for total hip replacement has improved dramatically in recent years with the development of new minimally invasive approaches, improved implant materials and design, and refined surgical techniques. “Modern hip replacement surgery is now much less invasive, with smaller incisions, less tendon and muscle trauma, less bleeding, less pain and less life interruption,” says OrthoVirginia surgeon Mark Madden, MD. “Patients are up and walking immediately and return to activities and work within weeks rather than months.”

Alice is a good example. Following her surgery, she walked into her hospital room with assistance just a few hours later. Soon she was walking on her own. From then on, her recovery progressed quickly. Several months of physical therapy improved her balance, strength and conditioning. Her new hip is now so strong she can support herself on one leg. But her greatest success is something most people take for granted: “I can walk!” she says.

She encourages anyone experiencing pain that interferes with daily life to go ahead and have hip replacement surgery. And she is grateful to Dr. Vitek for doing such a wonderful job. “The fact that he had done so many of these procedures gave me confidence,” she says. “It’s not a bad experience at all. I’m glad I did it.”

Mark P. Madden, MD, received a BS from the University of Notre Dame before going on to complete his medical degree from Georgetown University. Dr. Madden completed his training in orthopaedic surgery at Georgetown University Medical Center where he served as chief resident.

Brantley P. Vitek, MD, earned a BA in Philosophy from the University of Virginia before receiving his medical degree from the Medical College of Virginia. He then went on to complete a general surgery internship at the University of Colorado followed by an orthopaedic surgery residency at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston.

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