

Athlete regains his edge

Minimally invasive surgery restores full activity



Always athletic and competitive, Brian Grzelak initially shrugged off the pain he felt in his left hip during his daily run.

“I thought I could work through it,” says the 49-year-old Reston resident and home building company executive who has spent his life training for, and competing in, athletic events. “I never even considered that arthritis could be the cause. I was only in my early 40s — definitely too young for a hip replacement.”

But as the pain intensified over the next few years, and a switch from high-impact running to biking only temporarily alleviated it, Grzelak gradually came to grips with the fact he would need surgery. He consulted Mark Hartley, MD, an orthopaedic surgeon at Commonwealth Orthopaedics, who recommended a replacement, but not a traditional one. Young, healthy, and active, Grzelak was a perfect candidate for minimally invasive surgery – an advanced option featuring a smaller incision, quicker recovery, and a faster return to work and activities, including the competitive athletics he loved.

“Surgery was good and I had a great comfort level with Dr. Hartley,” Grzelak recalls of his minimally invasive hip replacement at Reston Hospital. “There wasn’t much pain and I went home in two days. Within two weeks I was driving, working, and riding a stationary bike.”

For Grzelak, and hundreds of others like him, the physical benefits of minimally invasive surgery are only part of Commonwealth Orthopaedics’ comprehensive approach, which begins long before the patient enters the operating room.

Total care for patients

“Our minimally invasive philosophy is a comprehensive one,” says Dr. Hartley. “We’ve developed a minimally invasive total joint program that encompasses all aspects of the surgical process — everything beginning with preoperative education, advances in pain management techniques, implant modifications, postoperative care, and, obviously, smaller incisions with less tissue trauma. Our patients feel more relaxed and positive heading into surgery. All these techniques contribute to a more rapid recovery and better early outcomes.”

Minimally invasive total joint replacement surgery has gained ground in the U.S. over the past decade. Commonwealth Orthopaedics' surgeons were among the first to perform these state-of-the-art procedures in the Washington area. Today, most hip and knee replacement surgeries are minimally invasive, with numerous benefits to the patient, including (1) smaller incisions — 3 to 5 inches versus 8 to 10 in traditional open surgery, (2) less postoperative pain, bleeding, and tissue trauma because fewer muscles are cut, (3) shorter hospital stays — one to two days compared with three to five for traditional surgery, and (4) faster recovery — weeks rather than months.

Total joint patients at Commonwealth Orthopaedics get comprehensive preoperative education in collaboration with area hospitals, such as Virginia Hospital Center's monthly class for patients and classes such as Total Joint Camp — an hour-long session run by trained nurses in Reston Hospital's joint replacement program that helps prepare patients physically and mentally for their procedures. Topics include what to expect before, during, and after surgery; practical advice about the hospital stay; physical and occupational therapy goals; and home assistance following discharge.

Managing fear and pain

"Preop classes such as Total Joint Camp go a long way toward setting patient expectations and easing fears," Dr. Hartley says. "When patients are educated they are less afraid and more focused on doing things to help themselves get better. They can begin their recovery on the day of their surgery."

Pain management is another important aspect of minimally invasive total joint replacement. Commonwealth Orthopaedics' surgeons work with anesthesiologists to head off pain before it begins. "We hit pain pathways with a variety of medicines before, during, and after surgery," Dr. Hartley says. "By launching this pre-emptive strike, we greatly reduce postoperative pain and minimize the side effects of anesthesia. Patients are up and active much more quickly."

Staying ahead of the pain has also significantly reduced the need for long-term IV narcotics following surgery. Most patients take only oral medications. "Pain management protocols are definitely the biggest advancement in minimally invasive surgery right now," says David Romness, MD. "Multimodal pain control not only makes surgery more comfortable, it also speeds recovery. A patient's biggest worry is pain. When we can control pain we improve outcomes, both psychologically and physiologically."

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— David Romness, MD

Faster recovery

The minimally invasive approach also hastens rehabilitation. "Because we are making smaller incisions in the tissue and cut through fewer tendons and muscles, there's less blood loss and function returns much faster after surgery than it did in the past," Dr. Hartley says. "Most patients can do good leg lifts immediately and walk farther faster. They can get back to daily activities and return to the workplace sooner."

Dr. Romness agrees. "Minimally invasive surgery coupled with newer, stronger prosthetics means patients can put their full weight on their new hips and knees from day one, with far fewer restrictions on activity. I tell my patients to go as fast as they feel comfortable going."

Good candidates for minimally invasive total joint replacement surgery have strong bone quality, normal anatomy and weight, and no prior replacement surgeries. Others may achieve better results with conventional surgery, so it's important to manage expectations, as Dr. Hartley cautions.

"Although the data suggests there is no long-term difference between minimally invasive and standard surgery, we never want to compromise the end result for

short-term gain," Dr. Hartley says. "That's why each patient should be carefully screened to determine the most appropriate type of procedure."

Happily for Brian Grzelak, minimally invasive hip replacement was the best option, allowing him to quickly return to the athletic lifestyle he loves. Just six months after his surgery, he competed in one of his favorite events: the annual Bike Hill Climb at Wintergreen Resort in Virginia. He rode up the mountain in 46 minutes — four

minutes shy of his previous best time. A year later, he erased those four minutes.

And now, Grzelak is competing in 100-mile bike races and has some encouraging words for his fellow baby-boomer athletes. "It's important they know I've been able to return to a high level of competitive activity," he says. "You never completely forget it's not your original hip, but surgery does make it dramatically better." **co**



Mark C. Hartley, MD, earned his medical degree from Georgetown University School of Medicine. He completed surgical internship and orthopaedic residency at Georgetown University Medical Center. Dr. Hartley was Chief of the Total Joint Replacement Service at Eisenhower Army Medical Center in Augusta, Georgia.



David W. Romness, MD, earned his medical degree from Eastern Virginia Medical School. He completed surgical and orthopaedic training at the Mayo Clinic. A general orthopaedist, Dr. Romness specializes in joint replacement procedures.

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