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THE WELL COLUMN

# Surprise Path to Better Sex: Hip Surgery

By **Tara Parker-Pope** April 8, 2013 4:47 pm

Want better sex? Consider getting a new hip or knee.

Before Mary Ann Okleson, a Manhattan magazine publisher, had both hips replaced a few years ago, the pain of arthritis made it difficult to walk, exercise or even climb into a taxi. Her failing hips had also taken a toll on her sex life.

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Tara Parker-Pope on living well.

“Sex was somewhat painful,” said Ms. Okleson, now in her early 60s. “You have to be more cautious. If I had to pick my leg up to put it in a cab, you can imagine what sex was like. I just wasn’t quite as nimble.”

But all that changed after hip replacement surgery. “It definitely improved my quality of life, and my love life,” she says.

While researchers have long known that hip and knee replacement leads to less pain and improved mobility, new research shows that the surgery offers an unexpected bonus in the bedroom. Among 147 patients who had joint replacement surgery in New York, most said arthritis had interfered with their sex lives, according to research presented last month at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons. After surgery, 81 percent of those patients who had said their sex lives had suffered as a result of a bad joint reported that the frequency of sexual activity had increased.

Many reported an increase in libido and stamina and an improvement in their ability to climax. The benefits were especially pronounced among patients whose complaint had been failing hips, as well as women, who reported the most discomfort during sex because of painful joints.

“If achieving a position in sexual function is very uncomfortable, it’s unlikely to be fruitful in terms of achieving climax,” said Dr. José A. Rodriguez, director of the Center for Joint Preservation and Reconstruction at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York and lead author of the study. “It’s like walking around with a rock in your shoe. It’s just not fun.”

Hip replacement surgery has risen 85 percent in the past decade, with doctors performing more than 300,000 procedures in 2010, the latest year for which statistics are available. But these are not your grandmother’s hips. Much of the increase in hip surgery has been fueled by active middle-age adults, 45 to 65. In that age group, hip replacements have nearly tripled to 128,000 during the same period.

Dr. Claudette Lajam, an orthopedic surgeon at the Center for Musculoskeletal Care at NYU Langone Medical Center, said that so many patients have questions about intimacy after joint replacement that she had added a page to her Web site devoted to sex.

“That page gets the most hits of any page on my Web site,” Dr. Lajam said. “There are a lot of people who get back out there, or get closer to their spouse, because they’ve been unable to participate in that intimacy for a while. Just the relief of pain itself improves the relationship.”

That was the case for D’Arcy Achziger, an apparel sales director in New York who opted for knee replacement two years ago with Dr. Lajam after suffering from excruciating pain during walking and other activities. “If your knee hurts to bend, that causes an adjustment in one’s personal life,” Ms. Achziger said.

After surgery, “my husband was thrilled,” said Ms. Achziger, who has been married for 24 years. “I had been cranky, just so crabby because it hurt. I was much more pleasant after surgery, and it made his life so much nicer.”

Dr. Charles Cornell, clinical director of orthopedic surgery at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York, said some patients are hesitant to talk about the toll joint pain can take on their sex life.

“It’s certainly a topic that is on everyone’s mind, but it’s not a topic that is always spoken about openly,” said Dr. Cornell. “It’s especially important to our younger patients, but believe it or not, I’ve had patients in their 80s who this has

been a topic for. If one member of a partnership becomes disabled, it does challenge the partnership.”

Kenneth Weinberg, a New York emergency room physician, had his right hip replaced in February. He said he has already noticed an improvement in his social life. “I have a number of really good friends in the city,” he said. “I love to visit them and walk around, but I wasn’t able to.”

Recently, he walked with a friend through Chelsea visiting art shows. “It was so liberating for me,” he said. “It was my first trip out, and we had such a great time.”

Shelly Bleier, a New York real estate agent, said she has always been so active and fit that people think she is 15 years younger. However, the excruciating pain of an arthritic hip began taking a toll on her work and social life. “When you are in pain, you don’t want to date, you don’t want to go anywhere,” she said. “When you need a hip replacement, the thought of even going downstairs or to the mailbox is hard.”

Ms. Bleier said that six months after hip surgery, her physician, Dr. Douglas Padgett at the Hospital for Special Surgery, noted that she still needed to improve the flexibility of her new hip. She laughed when he wrote her a prescription that said “Get boyfriend.”

But as it happened, Ms. Bleier said, she recently began an intimate relationship with a longtime friend, something that would have been hindered by her old, arthritic hip. “With the new hip, I felt like I was 40 years old,” she said.

During a return visit to Dr. Padgett recently, she shared the news. “By the way,” she told him, “I had your prescription filled.”

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