

## **Wanted: A new knee**

### **New treatment could help avoid total knee replacement**

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We feel confident in safely filing this in the "you don't appreciate them until they hurt" section – the good fortune of healthy knees. You may know the feeling. Pain starts to develop that makes it challenging to run, walk or possibly even stand up. You start to think you would give just about anything to get your good knees back.

Denver native Len Childers has dealt with debilitating knee pain since the late 1970s. Childers, 47, was told he needed a total knee replacement (TKR) by two separate doctors.

"I originally injured my knee in 1979 playing football in high school," he said. "Over the years I spent in the military as well as running, it got worse, and six years ago I started having lots of pain. I couldn't do the things I like to do anymore like riding motorcycles and playing with my grandkids. I went to three surgeons and they all told me I needed to live with it and deal with it because I was too young for a full knee replacement."

#### **Ouch**

Just writing about TKR is painful. The procedure involves replacing the diseased knee joint with artificial material.

Without getting too technical here, the end of the femur (high bone) is removed and replaced with a metal shell, and the end of the tibia (lower leg bone) is removed and also replaced with a channeled plastic piece with a metal stem. In some cases, depending on the condition of the kneecap, a plastic piece may also be added under the kneecap for stability.

Having seen some friends and family go through the excruciating process of recovery from TKR, Childers sought out an alternative, which came in the form of Dr. Roger Greenberg, who was the Denver Broncos team physician from 1981-1994.

#### **Customized implant**

Greenberg recommended partial knee replacement, or "unicompartmental knee replacement," which involved the use of technology to create a custom implant and surgical approach for each patient. The surgery removes only the most damaged areas of cartilage and affects only a small piece of bone. There was no guarantee that the partial knee replacement would be a permanent solution but the recovery time was significantly less than a TKR.

"We are seeing a significant increase in patients between the ages of 35 and 60 who are coming in with arthritic joints," said Greenberg. "We are concerned about younger patients because the life span of (TKR) surgery is around 20 years. The younger you are to be subjected to TKR, the greater risk the disease will advance or that the surgery won't last the rest of your life. Additionally, any subsequent surgery will give you a less-than-satisfactory result the second time around."

Childers underwent unicompartmental surgery on Jan. 6 and went home two days later. He only needed pain medication for one day and had nearly a full range of motion by his second week of physical therapy. He was walking with no pain after six weeks and now walks one mile per day. Doctors say someone who underwent a TKR can expect pain for up to 12 weeks following surgery. It is recommended that patients use a walker for two months and ice the knee up to five times per day.

#### **Generation of knee problems**

Greenberg attributes the sharp increase in people with knee problems to a generational trend for many with an exceedingly active lifestyle.

"By and large, it is generally felt that it has to do with the activity of the baby boomer generation and the ones that follow it," he said. "A good portion of the arthritis is a result of a very active lifestyle. The paradigm of concern that bothers most of us is what are we going to do in the 35-60 age group that is exceedingly active and has the condition? The partial knee replacement is certainly a less painful and invasive option if the patient fits the requirements."

Greenberg recommends you speak with your doctor and explore all of your options to see if you may be able to avoid a TKR.