Thumbs UP

Thumb joint replacement surgery restores functionality

Michael J. Sullivan, M.D., and Connie Lopez
Millions of Americans suffer from some form of arthritis, and the resulting pain and loss of function can be debilitating. Ads often illustrate knee and hip arthritis, but the base of the thumb, or the carpometacarpal (CMC) joint, is just as likely to be affected. In fact, by age 80, nearly 80 percent of women will experience arthritis pain at the base of their thumbs, according to the Arthritis Foundation. The condition is less common in men.

Connie Lopez was working as a floral designer when her pain started. “As a floral designer, I had to snip a lot of flowers,” she says. “I guess the cost of snipping was wear and tear on my thumb joint.”

Michael J. Sullivan, M.D., board-certified orthopaedic surgeon specializing in shoulder, elbow, wrist and hand surgeries, Summit Sports Medicine & Orthopaedic Surgery, a strategic affiliate of the Health System, says Ms. Lopez’s story is a common one. “Patients come to me all the time and say, ‘I don’t know how I got arthritis. I take care of the house or work in an office.’ But opening things in the kitchen, doing office work — it’s all pinching and gripping,” he says. “It puts a lot of force on the base of the thumb.”

Small Joint, Big Pain

Wear and tear led to pain in Ms. Lopez’s right thumb. The pain became so severe it began to affect her everyday activities, and she had to quit her job. “I lived with it for a long, long time,” she says. “Then it just got to the point where I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t even stand to let the shower rain down on my thumb.”

Ms. Lopez tried all the recommended non-surgical treatments. She wore a brace, but it grew cumbersome and ineffective. Over-the-counter anti-inflammatory pain medications helped, but she couldn’t take them regularly for fear of aggravating her gastroesophageal reflux disease. For a while, she found relief with cortisone injections. “Injections coupled with activity modification, such as reaching for a letter opener instead of ripping open a letter with your hand or using a jar-opener in the kitchen, can be very effective for many patients,” Dr. Sullivan explains.

But injections eventually failed to curb Ms. Lopez’s pain. That’s when she began to consider surgery.

Surgery and Beyond

Ms. Lopez decided to have her CMC joint replaced when the pain became unbearable. “The pain was so bad, I couldn’t take it anymore,” she says. “I wasn’t able to use that thumb at all, and that’s how I knew it was time.” Dr. Sullivan agreed with Ms. Lopez’s timing.

The surgery to replace the CMC joint only takes about an hour and is done on an outpatient basis using regional or general anesthesia. But that doesn’t mean it’s simple. “The procedure is pretty technically demanding,” Dr. Sullivan says. “It’s important to look for a surgeon who has completed a residency and an additional fellowship in hand surgery.”

Ms. Lopez chose Dr. Sullivan to perform her surgery, and today, nearly six years later, she’s still glad she had it done. “The results have been awesome. I can do anything I want to now,” she says. “I would recommend the surgery to anyone who is experiencing arthritis pain that prevents them from enjoying life.”

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For details about joint replacements call 1-855-ASK-SGHS (1-855-275-7447) or visit sghs.org/jointreplacements.