

A new option for that aching hip: resurfacing

But it's not less difficult for patient or MD

BY BARNABY J. FEDER
The New York Times

Hip replacement, an operation that about 300,000 Americans undergo each year, is one of the great success stories of modern medicine.

But woe to those who outlive their condition, because disease and obesity, may make even young patients poor candidates for resurfacing.

There are enough potential drawbacks, in fact, that doctors offering hip resurfacing say — as they do with standard hip replacements — that the procedure should be deferred as long as possible. That typically means waiting as long as the patient can tolerate the pain from the arthritis, bone damage or other conditions afflicting the hip.

"You should have pain every day before you even think about it," said

A HALF STEP TOWARD A WHOLE HIP

Hip resurfacing has been approved for use in this country since May 2006 for patients likely to outlive their first implant. The procedure, which involves capping rather than removing the head of the thighbone, or femur, leaves more of the patient's femur intact to

"There has been good literature and a good track record with favorable 10-year results. While it is a difficult surgery and the learning curve is steep, (the procedure) will hold up on a long-term basis and can be a permanent solution for eligible patients."

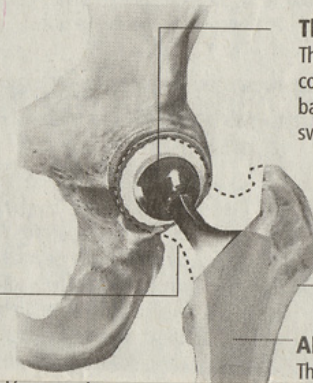
—Dr. James W. Pritchett,
orthopedic surgeon, Swedish Medical Center, who does resurfacing

TRADITIONAL HIP REPLACEMENT

Though one of the more reliably successful surgeries, the joints often wear out within 20 years. Because so much bone is removed in the procedure, replacing one can be difficult.

Head removal

In this operation, the entire head of the femur, or thighbone, is sawed off and



The joint

The femoral component consists of a hemispherical ball joint and stem that swivels in the cup.

Femur

ANCHOR

The surgeon drills a hole

ed, according to Macaulay.

Many patients, as a result, are continuing to go outside the country. Some fly to India, where the procedure is available for \$8,000. Others pay \$15,000 or so in countries such as Belgium or Britain, which have surgeons who have done hundreds or even thousands of resurfacings. But insurers rarely cover such "medical tourism."

Both resurfacing and hip replacements involve implanting a metal cup in a pelvic socket called the acetabulum. The primary difference is how each procedure deals with the

Some doctors say that resurfacing in the hands of experienced surgeons might result in repaired joints that last longer than most total hip replacements. But other experts, such as Dr. Justin Lamont, the chief of orthopedic surgery at Ticsch Hospital of New York University Medical Center, say the devices approved for the U.S. market are too new to be certain.

"Until we get 20 years out," he said, "we are not going to know how well resurfacing holds up."