

Skipping the Knee Surgery: 3 Success Stories

Patients of Regen Orthopedics share personal stories of how stem cell procedures helped them to heal knee surgery



By Northeast Ohio Media Group

Knee pain can stop a moving body in its tracks. Climbing stairs becomes a near impossible feat. Walking short distances, even around one's own home, is painful. Activities of daily living are an uncomfortable challenge—and forget walking the dog, kneeling to play with grandchildren, or enjoying a vacation.

“It hurt to do anything—my knees would ache and ache,” says Cindy Shoemaker, 60, a patient concierge. “I began to shuffle everywhere instead of picking up my feet to walk like a normal person.”

Shoemaker didn't like the idea of knee replacement surgery that would cause her to miss at least six weeks of work, along with imposing other movement restrictions. But the cortisone shots she was getting in her knees weren't working either.

Shoemaker opted for an alternative: regenerative medicine, a stem cell treatment for her knees to stop inflammation and pain. The non-surgical procedure uses your own adult stem cells to repair

injured tissues with new, functioning tissues.

Essentially, the therapy allows the body to heal itself. Stem cells that are rich in fat tissue and bone marrow are collected from your tissue and then injected into the injured tissue in an ultrasound-guided procedure. It's similar to a steroidal injection—but results of the outpatient procedure (that usually takes an hour) can last several years.

“While your body's ability to heal in the knee area may have been diminished, other areas of your body may be rich in stem cells that, if placed into the knee, can stimulate the growth of new cartilage,” says Trevor Bullock, D.O., CAQSM, orthopedic specialist at Regen Orthopedics.

“More importantly for some individuals, the treatment helps to change the biology of the joint to where it is not constantly inflamed and irritated,” Dr. Bullock says. “The combination of both of these factors helps with overall levels of pain.”

Pain relief and improved mobility is usually experienced within four to six weeks. Some patients feel better in just two weeks, Bullock says. “The outcome of treatment depends on the site and severity of the injury, as well as the patient's own healing potential,” he says.

Here, three patients share why they chose regenerative medicine to heal bad knees and the outcomes of the treatment.

No More ‘Bad Knee Shuffle’

The pain in her knees was so bad in Cindy Shoemaker's knees that she limped and shuffled rather than walking. “They were always sore and swollen, and so stiff after sitting behind my desk,

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that when I would get up I could barely walk,” says Shoemaker, who says she could hardly cut the lawn and took stairs one step at a time.

“If I pushed through a chore, I would pay for it later that evening or the next day,” she says. Walking her dog became a pain rather than a pleasure.

A couple years ago, Shoemaker had cortisone injections in her knees. The first round lasted six months. “I felt great—but then my knees started bothering me again to the point that I couldn’t walk,” she says.

She went for a second round of cortisone that lasted about two months. Following the third round, her pain only stopped for a few days. “It was terrible, and I even went back to the doctor and said, ‘Are you sure there was medicine in this shot?’” Shoemaker relates. “He sent me to Dr. Bullock to learn more about regenerative medicine.”

Shoemaker chose stem cell treatment to stop her knee pain without surgery. “I really didn’t want to do a knee replacement,” she says, not wanting time off and restrictions (like not kneeling). “I didn’t want to put hardware in my knee and have it get infected or have my body not want it.”

The beauty of stem cell treatments for the knee is that regenerative medicine uses the body’s own adult stem cells, so there is no risk of “rejection.”

Shoemaker had the stem cell procedure for her knees in January 2015. She had both knees done in less than three hours. “I was able to walk out of the doctor’s office,” she says. She took it easy that weekend and went to work on Monday. “I missed one day of work.”

“I am amazed, I hardly have any pain,” Shoemaker says of the results. A month after the stem cell knee procedure, she traveled to Florida to attend the Daytona 500 with her brother. “We walked everywhere—I felt so good,” she says.

Now a year later, Shoemaker’s knees are still going strong with no pain. As a patient concierge at University Hospitals Twinsburg Health Center, Shoemaker has an opportunity to share her story with others who are experiencing knee pain. She tells them, “It’s amazing how you can do everything in your life again. You don’t look at those steps and think, ‘I don’t want to go up.’ You can walk again.”

Relieving Tired Knees

Steven Shopp spent 42 years on his feet working as a senior mortician pathology assistant at University Hospital before retiring in 2011. “Just the abuse of being on your feet all the time takes a toll,” he says.

In 2009, Shopp had a total knee replacement on his left knee. Then last year, his general physician noted that he still had cartilage left in his right knee, and there was a way to save him from another total replacement. That sounded good to Shopp.

“The pain in my right knee was getting to a level of needing to do something about it,” says Shopp, 71. He consulted with Regen Orthopedics, where staff spent time explaining regenerative medicine and how stem cell treatment could benefit his knee.

Shopp remembered the 12 weeks off work he took following his total knee replacement. “I had a therapist come to the house three times a week for quite a while to get my knee back into shape,” he says of the surgery.

In June 2015, Shopp had the stem cell treatment in his right knee. He took it easy for the month after the procedure—he didn’t cut the grass—but soon afterward he was kicking a ball around with his young grandchildren. “I was able to move around without pain,” he says.

Shopp celebrated his 50th wedding anniversary with his wife in October. “I did two polka dances in a row without a problem,” he says with a laugh. “There

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was no pain at all.” And during the holidays, Shopp climbed up a 10-foot stepladder with ease to put up decorations. “No discomfort at all,” he reports.

For Shopp, the stem cell treatment for his right knee was an ideal alternative to surgery and allows him to enjoy life without steroids or anti-inflammatory medicines. “I’ve already recommended it to several friends,” he says.

Embracing Stem Cell Research

Forty years ago, Richard Bartlett fell off his motorcycle and injured his knee. He never did anything about the injury, aside from allowing time to heal the pain. But two years ago, that pain returned after a fall to the extent that walking was uncomfortable.

“I have an active job,” says Bartlett, 61, who drives a truck and must walk through expansive factories to communicate with customers. “I could barely make it,” he says, adding that staying seated for too long was uncomfortable, too. “It made daily activities difficult and caused me to limp very badly.”

Bartlett learned about stem cell therapy as an option to alleviate the inflammation, arthritis symptoms and pain in his right knee. “I’m always looking into advances,” he says of doing the research and vetting Regen Orthopedics and another facility in Pittsburgh. He chose Regen because of their experience.

Coincidentally, Bartlett had the stem cell treatment at the same time a partner at the trucking firm where he worked had a total knee replacement. I was back to work within a week, and I had to drive his truck for two months while he healed,” Bartlett says.

Following the procedure in May 2015, Bartlett says he no longer feels the arthritis in his right knee, and now he’s considering the stem cell procedure for his left knee. “I saw improvement within a few weeks,” he says. “I’m able to perform my daily activities now without nearly as much pain.” (Bartlett says he’s 85-percent pain free, which is what doctors promised.)

Now, he’s encouraging his wife to have stem cell treatment on her knees. “I’m extremely happy to have this type of medical research being done at a location near me,” he says of regenerative medicine.

The Stem Cell Alternative

People suffering from “bad knees” can opt for an alternative to surgery that drastically reduces downtime and delivers long-term results that can’t be achieved with steroids.

There’s no age limit for the stem cell procedure. “Regenerative medicine is perfect for people who are looking to avoid surgery, prolong the need for surgery, or who just may not be a candidate for surgery,” Dr. Bullock says, adding that it’s a way to avoid ongoing steroid treatment, as well.

How long might a stem cell treatment to the knees last? Dr. Bullock says many do not require additional treatment for several years after the procedure. “Most patients require one, sometimes two treatments,” he says. “Rarely will a patient require more than three.”

With stem cell treatments for knees, those who have failed conventional therapies can find relief. Like Shoemaker says, “I’m amazed at how much I can do now.”