

Horses and Hipsters

- by Jennie Hakes

Background

Over 1.2 million hip replacements and 800,000 knee replacements are performed in the U.S. each year. Of these, approximately 60% are performed on women, with the average patient age being 65 to 68. Compared to men, women have a higher prevalence of hip/knee arthritis and have worse symptoms.

Working with horses comes with risks and, almost inevitably, injuries, but we horsey people continue our equine love affairs. As we age and amass damage to our bodies, we often become more cautious, e.g., not training green horses, or giving up jumping. We also may choose joint replacement surgery when caution is not enough, and the pain becomes too great.

Two summers ago, I wrote about “Horses and the Aging Rider” (see Cross Country Magazine, July 2021). Since then, I have had a total hip replacement (THR). A year and a half later, I am back in the saddle, doing barn chores, and instructing both riding and exercise. Curious about other riders’ recoveries from joint replacements, I posted to a horsey forum, asking how others fared. Twelve women responded. They were riders, barn managers, and/or instructors. Ages ranged from 43 to the mid-70s, with operations done from 2005 to 2023. Operations included 8 THRs, 1 ACL, and 4 knee replacements; some had multiple joint replacements and/or surgeries.

First, my experience

My main ride is Colinda Z, a tank of a warmblood mare who is *q-u-i-t-e* wide. About 8 years ago, I started having pain in my right hip when riding. Being an exercise instructor, I doggedly tried to “fix” myself with numerous and various hip exercises prior to riding. It eased the pain somewhat - until it didn’t. The summer of 2021, X-rays showed arthritis in both hips, though the pain was only in my right one. Time to get that hip replaced! But due to COVID, scheduling was tricky, as THR is elective surgery and dates were not guaranteed. At last, I got on the calendar for November 3, 2021. I was 68 ½ years old.

By the end of October, I wanted one last ride before being sidelined. I needed my husband Steve’s help just to get on Colinda Z. I sat there and cried from the pain and wanted to get off right away, but how? I finally swung my right leg over her neck as I leaned back, and Steve caught me as I slid to the ground. My hip replacement could not come soon enough! I was mentally ready for it. Alas, my THR was postponed from November 3rd to the 29th (elective surgery vs. COVID), so I had to gear my mind up all over again. I will spare you the surgery details, except that my THR was an anterior approach.

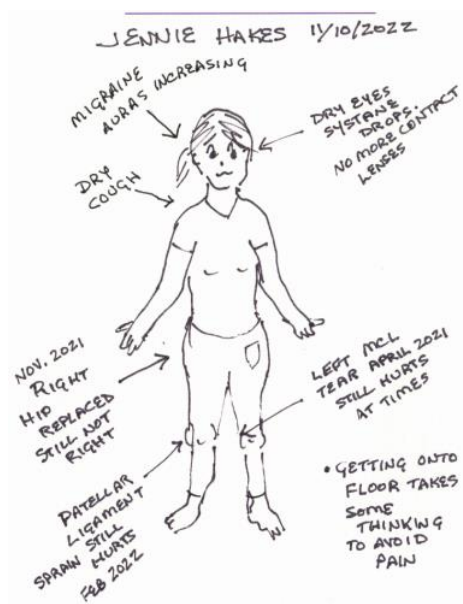
Recovery was long and painful (even more painful as I cannot tolerate opiates). I had lingering brain fog for at least a month. I religiously did the prescribed exercises at home. I did not venture to the barn until



week 4 when I stopped using a walker and started using a cane. I missed my critters so much. At week 5 I started picking out the stalls but Steve dumped the manure buckets.

My 6-week post-op x-ray showed everything as it should be, and the surgeon said now I could do anything, pain-free. Except I couldn’t and it wasn’t. The promised 6-week recovery turned into 22 weeks (my surgeon said my case was “unusual.”)

Getting back on the horse



I knew starting on a live horse would be tempting fate. Instead, I created a bomb-proof horse by setting a barrel on cavaletti crossbars. I practiced getting on and off “bareback” for weeks before graduating to hubby’s horse with a real saddle. A dressage saddle was a no-go; the cantle was too high to get my leg over, so I used (and still use) a low-profile jump saddle. The first few times I mounted from the “wrong” side, swinging my good leg over. Then I moved to the left side. It was not pretty, but I managed by hugging the horse’s neck while willing my bum leg up and over. Five months after surgery, I was riding after a fashion. By six months, I was on my wide grey mare. To my relief, no pain.

Straight from the Horse Riders’ Mouths

Below are some of the comments I received from the forum, edited for length and content. All these people were fine with my using their names. Many thanks to them for their caring. I hope it helps other equestrians with potential joint

replacements.

- **Ginny Lee**, who lives down the road on her horse farm, had a THR at age 66. “I did barn chores starting Day 3. I rode the day I was on the 6-week mark. I would absolutely do it again,” (Note: We had the same surgeon, but very different recoveries.)
- **Laura Carlson** simulated sitting on a horse using something called a “peanut ball.” She also put her jump saddle on a Courbette saddle stand to practice mounting and rising trot.
- **Allison Seder-Larson** suffered a meniscus tear. “I was off riding for about six weeks but did not post the trot for about 3 months. Other than that, it did not have an effect on my riding. I had a client a few years back have a hip replacement, and she was up and riding in 5 weeks!”
- **Jody Lee** had both hips replaced, at age 58 and again last year at age 64. “My most recent surgery has proven quite difficult to fully recover from. I am doing Essentrics, with Miranda Edmonds-White, and am having some success, although recovery, a year on is still slow. Due to my work schedule, I only ride twice a week so that may also contribute to my slow recovery. However, I am seriously grateful that I can ride as, prior to my last surgery, I had to take a break from riding due to the extreme pain I was in. I do also think that at least part of my slow recovery is that I waited too long to do this second hip replacement.”
- **Lin Nelson-Mayson** had a THR in 2016. “I was babying a degenerating hip through increasing discomfort and two steroid shots. When I could no longer throw my leg over my horse without kicking her, I knew it was time to really face the problem. My surgeon did a posterior (side entry) surgery. I was up and walking almost immediately, although it was about 6-8 weeks before I was able to drive. I was able to return to the barn then to smell horses and groom and was able to ride again after 12 weeks. It was absolutely worth it, but it did take a while to regain control of my ‘new leg’. I still blame riding errors on that bionic hip!”
- **Julie Christie** just had a THR this spring at the tender age of 43. “I am a full-time trainer- ride several horses a day and teach when I’m not on a horse. I was pretty young for a hip replacement, but

arthritis wasn't going to go away, and the surgeon said he can fix the broken part... It's been a more painful recovery than expected. I'm quite comfortable riding (and am back to full time horse training plus I plan on showing this summer) but walking is still difficult... One of the best things I found was a Facebook group called "Hip Replacement for Horse People." I think that was my downfall too - lots of people saying "it would be a breeze" for me because I was young and fit. I wish I had been told a more realistic picture of the recovery. I was on a horse earlier than the surgeon would have liked but I was smart - didn't do anything that hurt and started with the safest horses. I couldn't figure out how to post the trot for the first few weeks which was shocking- I've been riding for over 30 years and teach biomechanics. It wasn't because of stiffness but because the brain to muscle connection didn't work. I'm still happier sitting the trot than posting (even on bouncy horses) because that coordination is building slowly."

- **Pat Nimmerfroh** had a knee replacement in 2018 at age 62. "I had right knee arthritis that caused pain with each step (and each rising post.) My doctor was a knee specialist and had done many knee replacements so he knew what he was doing and assured me I would get the right size knee replacement. I got lucky and had an outstanding physical therapist too. I was able to get in the saddle 6 weeks after surgery. I can do everything – pain-free - I did before my arthritic knee sidelined me. I ride both dressage and jump stadium and XC and have no issues with any riding activities. I limit trail rides to 2 – 2 ½ hours but I've been needing to do that since my fifties. Both knees get sore if I ride longer. I find Voltaren gel applied a couple times a day to be very helpful in preventing that. I still manage my boarding barn, but I finally hired full time help last year so don't have to do as much physical labor. I was able to do it just didn't want to work that hard at 66!"
- **Gail Brandt** is 70. She had a left total knee replacement in January 2005, a THR in 2011, and knee rehab in 2019. After her 2005 surgery, she was "riding again in 8 weeks at walk with supervision and at 12 weeks jumping 2 horses. It's still working great. My biggest fear after surgery was mounting. A friend built me a big, sturdy mounting block." After her 2011 THR, her doctor wondered why she had waited so long. "Because I was worried that I wouldn't be able to ride, but Kathy Ott did it and that was enough to reassure me. I blew out my right knee in 2019. Do not try to stick a landing over 65." Gail decided to do a functional recovery and have the knee surgery later. "So far, very good. If I feel myself falling (on the ground), I just 'sink' into it and then get up."
- **Nancy Kaminski** had both knees replaced, the first in 2010, the second in 2016. "My experience has been nothing but positive. The first knee went smoothly. My recovery with twice-weekly PT took about 6 weeks---that's the point at which I got back on my horse and rode at a walk. After a week of that, I sat the trot (not ready to rise yet). At 8 weeks I felt I was almost back to normal. The second knee was easier on me. I was back on my horse at 5 weeks after the usual twice weekly PT sessions. I felt pretty much back to normal by 7 weeks post-op. The key, I think, was to do all my PT despite it being rather painful. I was just riding dressage during the knee recoveries. I am now teaching my pony to jump, and so riding with much shorter stirrups and bent knees, and it's no problem at all. I am extremely pleased with my fake knees. Recalling how painful they were as they degenerated to bone-on-bone, and the elaborate unloader knee braces I wore to walk more than a few hundred yards with no pain, I'm just sorry I waited until each knee was trashed before having them done. The only downside is you set off metal detectors at the airport and always have to go through the full-body scanner or get patted down. I keep an x-ray of my fake knees on my phone to show the TSA if they get stupid about it all. "

- **Diane Stoffel** had both hips replaced: “I was so sore I could hardly ride. Getting off the horse was excruciating. I now have zero pain riding or dismounting, and I walk away with zero pain. Do I feel like I'm 30 again? No, but it surely improved my situation by about 95%.”
- **Mary Jo Kappler Cody**: “Pilates is a godsend.”
- **Barb Scottston** is nearly 70. “Four years ago, I had a complicated knee replacement. Immediately following, I went into residential rehab for two weeks, which included PT sessions twice a day. After discharge, I continued outpatient PT three times per week. For months. I absolutely credit those physical therapists for my current ability to remain riding effectively, albeit for shorter rides. While our muscle memories may endure, our muscle resilience does not. Because I’m concerned about asymmetrical compensations negatively affecting my riding, I’ve recently begun riding with an **Equestic Saddle Clip**. So far, so good. I’m hoping it provides early warning before either of my horses ‘feel my pain.’ I'd like to hear others' experience with Equestic. Per the company, only the symmetry measurements in trot will reflect rider issues. It's still a bit of a chicken-and-egg conundrum in my mind.”
- **Therese Volmer** is a lesson in perseverance. “I have had 9 knee surgeries...one replacement. Both thumbs replaced, carpal tunnel on both hands, surgery on both elbows and 1 wrist and 1 year ago had Mayo do a decompression and fusion of L-1 through the sacrum. I was riding 3 months after my spinal surgery. The longest I waited to ride post any knee surgeries was 60 days. I have 12 horses that I care for and ride 8. I play polo. Glad I did all of them except maybe the elbows. Didn't get much help there. “

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Below: Jennie Hakes on her Zangersheide mare, Colinda Z

