HEALTH& FITNESS

Cartilage knee repair surgery gaining popularity

It might be from an accident. Maybe from a sports injury. Or it just happened. Whatever the cause, knee injuries can seriously sideline your life and your activities; that is, until recently. Today, an array procedures for knee repair can give you back your active life.

Dr. Gregg Berkowitz, a board-certified orthopedic surgeon at Advanced Orthopedics and Sports Medicine Institute, with offices in Freehold and Monroe townships, talked about a cutting-edge procedure in repairing knees that has been gaining popularity recently.

Dr. Berkowitz says, "My patient, a 39-year-old man from Manalapan, was playing soccer for fun on the weekend when he injured his knee. He came to us with pain and we treated it; however, when there wasn't any improvement after some nonsurgical treatment, it became apparent that he needed surgery."

Dr. Berkowitz continues, "In this procedure to repair his knee, I took a biopsy of the cartilage and sent it to a laboratory in Cambridge, Mass., where it took several weeks to culture the cells. Once the cartilage cells were ready, I replaced the damaged area in his knee by filling it with these new cartilage cells, which over time will hopefully form new cartilage. Culturing is a very recent cartilage repair technique and is successful because culturing creates the same type of joint cartilage, rather than scar tissue."

Right now the patient is on a machine that bends his knee for him in order to regain its mobility. He is on limited weight bearing; but after about six weeks, he will progress into some physical therapy.

This particular surgery, called autologous chondrocyte repair, is one of the newer procedures that is available for certain younger individuals whose injury might result in a loss of cartilage in the knee.

"Cartilage restoration is usually suitable for teens and those up to about age 55. Unfortunately, cartilage restoration is not a viable technique for the Medicare-aged populace, the elderly, or those who might need a partial or total joint replacement," says Dr. Berkowitz. "Because this technique is used to repair cartilage instead of replacing it with an artificial joint, it works best on younger people."

"In any procedure available," says Dr. Berkowitz, "the idea is to try to repair the cartilage area, making it as normal as possible. Growing cartilage cells is only one of the several options available in trying to restore a knee to as close to its normal state as possible, to relieve pain, and to return people to their normal activities. In this situation, the rest of the patient's knee looked pretty good."

Although this procedure is new to this area, Dr. Berkowitz has been performing it for about a year. One of the problems in bringing this procedure to patients sooner was getting it recognized as an accepted treatment option for cartilage damage.

"Culturing a patient's own cartilage cells and then putting them back into the knee at a later time is an exciting new operative technique," says Dr. Gregg S. Berkowitz.

Dr. Berkowitz, who has been practicing for 17 years, specializes in sports medicine with a particular interest in cartilage injuries of the knee and other joints, total joint arthroplasty, and fracture and trauma care. Dr. Berkowitz has been featured in "Healthy Direction" publications, has been interviewed on local TV, and is on the staff at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, teaching Family Practice residents. He also has taught students in the Medical Science program, a specialized program in Freehold Borough High School, and frequently teaches bone health and anatomy to elementary school children and the community.

Dr. Berkowitz is vice president of Advanced Orthopedic and Sports Medicine Institute; past secretary of the medical staff of CentraState Medical Center (CSMC) where he is also a past member of the Board of Trustees, and a faculty member of the Family Medicine Residency Program. He served as past chairman of orthopedic surgery for two terms at CSMC and was voted Physician of the Year in 2006 by the nursing staff of CSMC for his level of dedication and the quality of patient care he gives.