

Aquatic Therapy After Total Knee Arthroplasty Improves Outcomes

Despite increased use of total hip arthroplasty (THA) and total knee arthroplasty (TKA), there is a notable lack of consensus about optimal post-operative treatment. Aquatic therapy has been shown to have a beneficial effect, and it is typically begun two weeks after surgery, after the wound has healed. According to a new study published in the *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*, beginning aquatic therapy just six days after TKA may lead to improved results, while delaying its onset an additional week may be more appropriate after a THA.

"This multi-center study demonstrates that the timing of physiotherapy measures, such as aquatic therapy, has clinically relevant effects after TKA," says lead investigator Thoralf R. Liebs, MD, of the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, University of Schleswig-Holstein Medical Center, Kiel, Germany. "Ours is one of the few studies that demonstrates a clinically important effect on the health-related quality of life after TKA by a factor that can be influenced by the healthcare professional. The intervention is simple to administer, and requires limited extra input from the healthcare professional."

THA and TKA patients were randomly assigned to receive aquatic therapy beginning either six or 14 days after the procedure. In both groups, therapy lasted 30 minutes, three times a week, up to the fifth post-operative week. Physical function, pain, and stiffness were evaluated three, six, 12, and 24 months after the procedure. After hip arthroplasty, all measurements at every follow-up period were better in the patients who began aquatic therapy after the wound had healed. In contrast, all mean outcomes were better in the group that began therapy six days after knee arthroplasty.

"THA has a high rate of patient satisfaction, and patients report an improved quality of life after the procedure. Additional interventions, such as early aquatic therapy, may not lead to much improvement," Dr. Liebs hypothesizes. "After TKA, patients are less satisfied, so the additional intervention has a greater effect. The hydrostatic force of water reduces effusion in the knee joint. Because the knee capsule is closed after TKA, reduced effusion leads to less pain. In THA, the joint capsule is not closed, so the effect of reduced effusion is less."

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