

No More Knee Pain

Bilateral Replacements Get a Young Woman Back on her Feet

by Mary Ann Luther

At first glance, you might think Sarah Elkins' life is rather ordinary. Like millions of women, this wife and mother drives her kids to school, cheers them on at events, takes them shopping and more.

Until you look closer at her swollen knuckles or see the scars on her knees. They're reminders of a rare, degenerating disease that once confined Sarah to a wheelchair—until total knee replacement surgery at St. Joseph Medical Center got her back on her feet.

For Sarah, the ordinary is now extraordinary. But it wasn't always that way.

Out of the blue

Fit and energetic, Sarah loved throwing softballs and spiking volleyballs with her three daughters—when she wasn't playing with preschoolers as part of her job with her school district.

"I didn't even like going to the doctor," says Sarah, 36, of Belton, Mo. "I was a very healthy, active person."

Until October of 2006. That's when Sarah, who was living in Ohio at the time, began experiencing joint pain and sore throats that didn't let up. Then one day, her left wrist became red and swollen.

She visited her physician. He thought Sarah—who was taking online college courses and typing a lot—might have carpal tunnel syndrome, a condition caused by a pressed nerve in the wrist.

"About two weeks later, I got up one morning so I could wake up the kids for school," says Sarah. "I couldn't even climb the stairs. I had to crawl. Also, my jaw and neck were swollen and painful. It was really scary."

Her husband, Rob, and daughters—Hayley, Bethany and Abby—watched in worry and disbelief.

"We were all wondering, What could this be? What's going on?" recalls Sarah. "It was just a strange thing to happen so suddenly."

The next (painful) step

Sarah's pain continued to get worse. For a month, Sarah visited the doctor weekly and tried antibiotics and anti-inflammatory drugs to dull her relentless aches. Nothing worked.

Next step? A rheumatologist, who gave Sarah more tests and "drew enough blood to feed a vampire." But the only conclusion from the blood tests was that there was a dramatic increase in inflammation.

Meanwhile, the medicines the doctor prescribed—painkillers and a rheumatoid arthritis drug—didn't work. The pain in

Sarah's joints got progressively worse, especially in her knees, wrists and knuckles.

New town, new search

In the summer of 2007, Sarah and her family moved back to Belton, where she and Rob had grown up. There, she renewed her quest for answers and relief. While her body racked with pain and throbbed, Sarah tried more physicians, more tests and more drugs, with no relief. Worse, X-rays showed that her wrist bones had fused together.

"From the time I woke up, not being able to walk up the stairs, to the time my wrists were fused, was less than two years," says Sarah. Despite visits to various physicians and several medications, no one had been able to solve her problem. Sarah's quality of life was slipping away.

"I was having trouble washing my hair, dressing myself, slicing vegetables, opening water bottles," says Sarah. "I had to stop working out and riding bikes with the kids."

An answer at last

In May of 2008, Sarah consulted a specialist at the Mayo Clinic. He took one look at Sarah's X-rays, factored in her young age and pored over her recent, rocky medical history. Diagnosis? Still's Disease.

Adult onset Still's Disease—the kind that Sarah has—is an inflammatory condition with no known cause. It ravages joints and sometimes organs, potentially causing heart inflammation and fluid buildup around the lungs. The disease strikes less than one in 100,000 people annually—usually before they're 45 years old – and causes symptoms including joint pain, sore throat, high fever and rashes.

Ironically, the diagnosis came as a relief.

"Someone actually knew what was going on with my body," says Sarah. "Someone understood what I was going through."

Battling more than 'the blues'

The Mayo doctor, who still monitors her illness, advised Sarah to see an orthopedic specialist about her knees. She made an appointment with Scott Luallin, MD, an orthopedic surgeon at St. Joseph.

"When I first saw Sarah, you could tell she was someone putting up with chronic pain, like someone who's got the blues," says Dr. Luallin. "When you're hurting constantly, it brings you down."

Together, they determined an immediate course of action: cortisone shots in Sarah's knees to reduce inflammation. They tried the shots for more than a year, beginning in November 2009.



► “Sarah got some short-term relief,” says Dr. Luallin. “But as time went on, the shots were becoming less effective.” By January of 2011, it was clear Sarah’s condition required more aggressive action.

“My knees had stopped supporting my legs,” says Sarah. “My joints were destroyed. I could feel my bones sliding around. I could barely walk from my bed to the bathroom without a walker. I started using a wheelchair.”

Under the knife

Dr. Luallin and Sarah agreed it was time for a total knee replacement in both knees, a solution that doesn’t stop the progression of Still’s Disease but does provide relief for painful knee symptoms. He used a type of knee implant that provides flexion and range of motion similar to a natural knee.

The morning after surgery, Sarah was up and out of bed, literally taking her first steps toward recovery. One person helping her was Wendi Hoepfer, RN, BSN, an orthopedic nurse whom she’d met before surgery.

“Wendi was a combination of advocate, nurse and friend,” says Sarah.

That’s a role Hoepfer relishes as part of the Joint and Spine Institute – an education, rehab and recovery program offered at both St. Joseph and St. Mary’s Medical Centers. “The program is personalized, and patient education is a big piece of it,” says Wendi. “Meeting patients and talking about their surgery beforehand decreases anxiety about what to expect.”

And then, there’s the continuity of care. Not only did Wendi check in frequently on Sarah, “She even checked on me after I had left her department and moved to rehab,” says Sarah.

“Wendi played a major role in my healing process those first couple of days after surgery. She was like my rock, and I don’t know what I would have done without her.”

At home and healthier

After Sarah got out of the hospital, she received at-home physical therapy from Carondelet Home Care for about eight weeks.

Again, St. Joseph’s continuity of care kicked in. Home visits from Shannon Teter, physical therapy assistant, not only got Sarah moving again, they lifted her spirits, as well.

“There’s a whole emotional side to being sick,” says Sarah. And that’s something Shannon understood and discussed, as the two worked on Sarah’s legs. “Shannon was like a hug,” says Sarah.

Back in the saddle

Once home therapy ended, Sarah began outpatient therapy. And now, she’s getting back in the groove.

“I can do things like drive and pick up the kids from school and go to my children’s awards ceremonies, plays and concerts,” says Sarah. “I wasn’t able to do that before. I was the girl in the wheelchair that everyone stared at. At school, everyone wanted to know, ‘What happened to your mom?’”

As for Sarah’s wrists and hands? She still has some flexion and limited use. And she’s considering a new drug that may help, later this year.

In the meantime, she’s walking – and the wheelchair is gone. “I never want to see that thing again,” says Sarah. Thanks to her knee replacement surgery, she may not have to.

“I could have stayed in extreme pain in a wheelchair and continued to limit my activities—or go through surgery and have my life back,” says Sarah. “I think I made a good decision and I’m glad I did it.”

“I could never have made it through this journey without the help and support of my family and friends, as well as my faith,” says Sarah. “I see my struggles as a gift from God – an opportunity to use my own experiences to help others.”

Free Seminars Provide Information on Joint Replacement

Knee pain is one of the most common complaints among Americans. In fact, according to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, more than 11 million physician visits are made each year because of a knee or knee-related condition. And, as in Sarah Elkins’ case, the knee pain often leads to replacement surgery.

Knee replacement surgeries have doubled over the last decade and more than tripled in the 45 to 64 age group. Hip replacements are also increasing. The numbers show baby boomers are going kicking and screaming into their retirement years, and expect to be able to continue physical activities.

And these aren’t your grandmother’s joint replacements. There have been significant improvements in both the artificial joints and the surgery itself over the last decade. Technology is allowing orthopedic surgeons to nearly custom fit each patient. The recovery has changed over the years as well.

“People used to stay in bed for days after a replacement surgery,” says Lisa Boyd, RN, BSN, nurse navigator for the Joint and Spine Institute at St. Mary’s. “But research has shown better outcomes by getting patients out of bed and into physical therapy the day after their surgeries.”

Navigators in the Joint and Spine Institute at St. Joseph and St. Mary’s Medical Centers manage care among doctors, nurses and physical and occupational therapists. Patients occupy their own area of the unit, where they’re fast-tracked for a successful recovery that includes in-hospital rehab, in-home therapy and outpatient physical therapy, as needed.

Most patients go through various therapies together – a major morale booster, according to patients who’ve gone through the program.

The Joint and Spine Institutes offer free seminars to people living with joint pain. Participants can ask questions, explore options and learn what to expect before, during and after joint replacement surgeries.

Joint and Spine Institute at St. Joseph Medical Center

Every Tuesday

9-11 a.m.

Call 816-943-2366 to register.

Joint and Spine Institute at St. Mary’s Medical Center

Second Tuesday of every month

10 a.m.- noon

Call 816-655-5555 to register.