

Surgery to replace an elbow

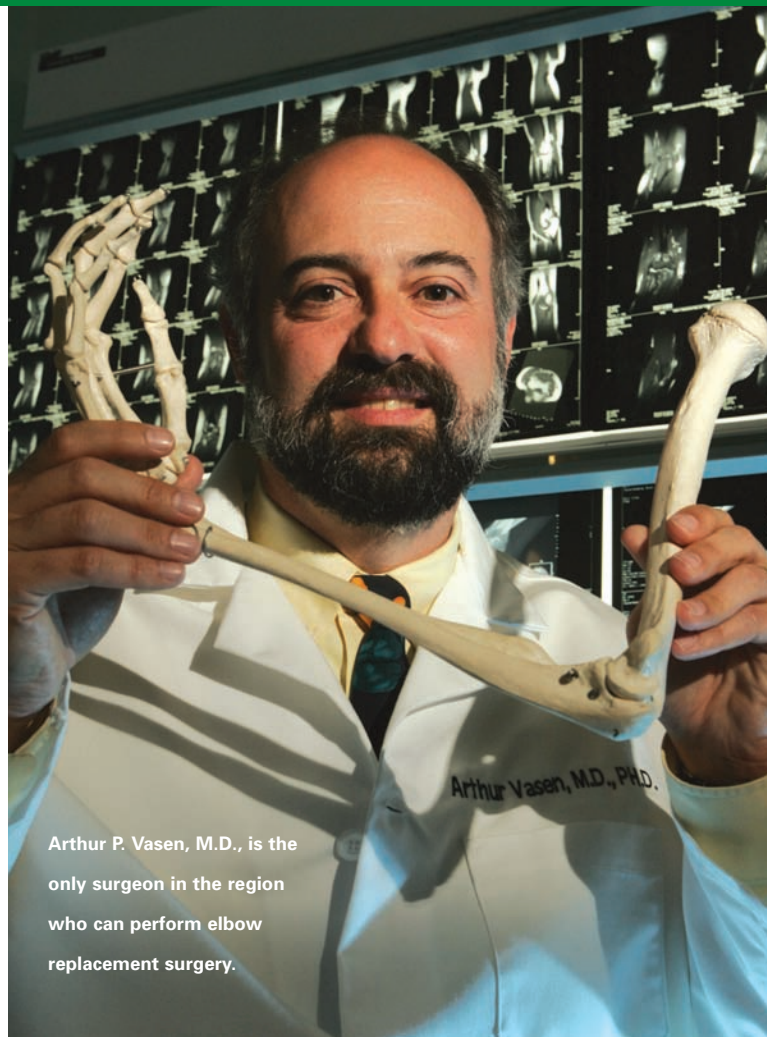
TODAY, JOINT OPERATIONS
GO BEYOND HIPS AND KNEES

YOU PROBABLY KNOW SOMEONE who has had a hip or knee replaced. Each year, about 650,000 total joint replacement procedures are performed by orthopedic surgeons in the U.S. The vast majority involve hip and knee joints—but not all. Total joint replacement also can be performed on other damaged or diseased joints, but it takes special skill and training to do so. One Monmouth Medical Center orthopedic surgeon, in fact, is the only surgeon in the region able to perform elbow replacement surgery.

Arthur P. Vasen, M.D., of Seaview Orthopedics in Ocean Township, says the procedure is pretty rare. “I only do one or two a year,” he says, “because elbow replacement is indicated only for a few select patients.” Seniors who have fallen and broken their elbows make up about 90 percent of his cases, he says. The rest are younger patients with very severe arthritis.

As we age, our bones naturally grow thinner and more brittle. When older elbows break, they often shatter into many small pieces—“like Humpty Dumpty, but with an extremely fragile shell,” says Dr. Vasen. Putting the pieces back together again is nearly impossible. “The screws don’t hold well, the bones don’t heal properly, the recovery takes a long time,” he says. “A new joint gets them up and moving right away and lasts 10 to 15 years, which is usually the rest of their lives.”

To replace an elbow, Dr. Vasen makes an incision along the back of the arm to expose the elbow joint. He then drills into the lower end of the humerus (the upper arm bone) and the upper end of the ulna (the larger of the two bones in the lower arm) and inserts a metal stem



Arthur P. Vasen, M.D., is the only surgeon in the region who can perform elbow replacement surgery.

into each bone. Once secured with special bonding cement, the stems are joined together with a metal and plastic hinge system that allows the artificial elbow to bend.

Patients are usually in physical therapy within a week and moving independently in two to four weeks. By six months, they are fully recovered and have “functional mobility”—they won’t ever have full motion, but they are able to do all normal activities.

Most large academic medical centers such as Monmouth have surgeons trained to do these unusual procedures. “You want a doctor who is fellowship-trained in upper extremity surgery and has done at least a couple of them,” says Dr. Vasen, who trained at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. He knows his skills will be in greater demand as the population ages and requires better options for staying independent. ■

To learn more about joint replacement surgery at Monmouth Medical Center, please call 1-888-724-7123.