

by N. Michael Xu, MD

Joining Piedmont Orthopedics  
in August 2014



**N. Michael Xu, MD,**

is a board-eligible orthopedic surgeon who is joining Piedmont Orthopedics in August 2014. He will see patients with all types of orthopedic problems, but has a special interest in hand surgery and knee and hip replacement surgery. Dr. Xu has advanced training in Oxford® partial knee replacement surgery.

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Do you have a question related to this column or a general orthopedic question you would like to have answered in a future issue? Send an e-mail to [AskPiedmont-Ortho@sosbonedocs.com](mailto:AskPiedmont-Ortho@sosbonedocs.com).

**Q.** I am having pain in my thumb and weakness when I use a key or try to open a jar. The pain sometimes shoots down my thumb. What could this be?

**A.** It sounds like you might have osteoarthritis in the joint at the base of your thumb. Tendinitis is another possible cause, but arthritis is more common when patients have trouble with pinching objects and gripping movements, such as opening jars. Thumb arthritis, which occurs when the cartilage in the basal joint wears away, is the second most common type of arthritis. It is more common in women than men, and occurs in conjunction with carpal tunnel syndrome about 50 percent of the time.

If the pain is interfering with activities, you may want to see an orthopedist for an evaluation. In addition to examining you, we will take an x-ray of your thumb joint. If osteoarthritis is causing your symptoms, the x-ray will show signs of that.

The first line of treatment for osteoarthritis is anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen or Aleve. Anti-inflammatory gel, applied to the skin, often helps with pain in the thumb joint. We also may suggest a splint to stabilize the thumb and injections to reduce pain.

If none of these conservative measures provide relief, you may want to consider surgery to remove the diseased bone, which is then reconstructed using a tendon. After their recovery from surgery, most patients are able to return to normal activities.

**Q.** I'm a 55-year-old woman who loves to play tennis. I have played recreationally for years with no problem, but over the last few months I've had to cut back because of pain on the inside part of my right knee. I've tried taking Aleve and ibuprofen, but neither helps very much. What could be causing this pain? And what can I do so I can get back to my regular tennis schedule?

**A.** The most likely cause of the pain you describe is knee arthritis. This occurs when cartilage that provides a cushion between the bones wears away, causing them to rub together. Knee arthritis can occur in one or more of the three compartments in the knee. Your symptoms suggest you might have arthritis in the medial compartment, on the inside of the knee, but you should see an orthopedist for a diagnosis. We will do an examination and probably a stress x-ray of your knee. This type of x-ray is taken while a technologist places a hand on the outside of your knee and exerts gentle pressure. This enables us to see on the x-ray which knee compartments have been affected by arthritis.

Initial treatment for knee arthritis includes anti-inflammatory drugs and activity modifications. We also may suggest physical therapy to strengthen muscles around the knee, injections for pain, and use of a brace.

If those steps don't help, surgery is an option. If your arthritis is in more than one compartment, you typically will need a total knee replacement.

However, if arthritis is found in only one compartment, such as the medial compartment, you may be a candidate for a partial knee replacement, a less invasive alternative. The size of the incision and the time the patient spends in the hospital are typically half of that required for a total knee replacement. Pain is usually much less. Most patients are out of the hospital the next day and back to normal activities, such as tennis, in as little as 6 weeks.