

Health & Harmony

Stem-cell treatment has fans among recreational athletes

What's the hot topic on senior-league tennis courts these days?

Two words: stem cells.

More and more aging recreational athletes with painful, worn-out knees are saying "no" to knee replacement surgery and "yes" to outpatient treatment in which their own stem cells are used to regenerate (theoretically, anyway) the knee joint. Many are getting positive results, and they're spreading the word.

"I've heard from a couple of people that it's like a miracle," said one 78-year-old coastal resident who plays tennis frequently at local clubs.

Listen closely to the court-side buzz, and you're likely to hear two other words:

"Dr. Purita." That would be Joseph R. Purita, M.D., of Manalapan, director of the Institute of Regenerative and Molecular Orthopaedics in Boca

Raton. The institute is an offshoot of Purita's longtime surgical practice at Boca Raton Orthopaedic Group.

Purita is considered an expert in the use of adult stem cells for orthopedic repair. He's lectured around the world, and taught his technique free of charge to doctors from as far away as Australia. He has treated 4,000 patients ranging in age from 40 to 70, including many high-profile professional athletes, and he claims an 85 percent success rate for the knees.

Here's how it works: The doctor harvests mesenchymal stem cells (the type that repair and regrow muscle, bone, cartilage and tendons) from a patient's fat and/or bone marrow. Fat samples are taken via mini-liposuction of the patient's midsection; bone marrow is extracted from the back of the pelvis. While the patient waits, the samples are spun in a centrifuge to isolate the stem cells, which are then injected into the patient's joint the same day. Four to six weeks later, platelet-rich plasma (PRP) spun from the patient's own blood also is injected into the joint.

"Think of the platelets as fertilizer for the stem cells," Purita explains. "They release growth factors that give the stem cells signals to start working to repair things."

PRP injections alone can help some patients, Purita says, by releasing growth factors and signaling proteins that may summon stem cells from elsewhere in the body to repair the joint. In these cases, a bit of the patient's fat is injected to serve as scaffolding for the incoming stem cells.

Purita's technique fits within FDA guidelines for stem cell therapy, but is not covered by insurance. He charges \$600 for PRP only, and \$4,800 for the complete treatment (stem cell injections from fat and bone marrow, scaffolding-fat injections, and three subsequent PRP injections).

One of Purita's satisfied customers is Mary Ellen Cook, whose family owns Hand's Stationers in Delray Beach. Now in her 70s, Cook says stem cell therapy has enabled her



Injections of her own stem cells helped Mary Ellen Cook of Delray Beach (right) avoid knee-replacement surgery. Cook plays tennis twice a week with other senior players like Joyce Joyner of Delray Beach, who have also found pain relief through stem-cell therapy. Kurtis Boggs/The Coastal Star

to stay active and keep up her tennis game. Her tennis buddy, Joyce Joyner, 60, also sought Purita's treatment to quell the pain in both of her arthritic, bone-on-bone knee joints.

"It worked great for me," says Joyner. "I'm putting off knee replacement as long as possible."

To date, however, there is little hard science proving the stem cell treatment really works. Some physicians, like Freddie H. Fu, M.D., chairman of the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery at the

University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, remain skeptical.

"Basically, there's no evidence to show one way or the other that it makes any difference," Fu says. "Why don't we test it more vigorously before we shoot it into everybody?"

Purita emphasizes that not everyone is a candidate for stem cell therapy, and about 15 percent of the time, it just doesn't work. But he feels strongly that "it's not going away."

"The arthroscope

revolutionized sports medicine and orthopedics," Purita says. "Stem cells are the next big revolution. Some day we're going to look back at knee and hip replacement surgery and say, how could we have done such barbaric operations?"



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