

Characterizing The Unhappy Total Joint Patient: A Thematic Assessment of Patient-Reported Dissatisfaction After Hip and Knee Arthroplasty

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INTRODUCTION: Recent literature suggests that patient satisfaction may be as high as 95% following total hip arthroplasty (THA) and 90% following total knee arthroplasty (TKA). However, it is important to understand why patients may report dissatisfaction, especially since dissatisfaction has been linked with poor physical function, higher healthcare utilization, and litigation risk. As such, the present study qualitatively described key thematic patterns in patient-reported dissatisfaction following total joint arthroplasty.

METHODS: Adult patients who underwent THA or TKA between 2018-2024 and used a web-based home therapy program were included in this retrospective cohort study. Patient demographics and patient-reported procedural satisfaction at 3 months post-operation, categorized as Dissatisfied (“Very Dissatisfied” or “Dissatisfied”), Neutral (“Neutral”), and Satisfied (“Very Satisfied” or “Satisfied”), were reported. Free-text narrative explanations of dissatisfaction, when available, were evaluated through an inductive thematic analysis. Two investigators independently open-coded the data, iteratively grouping codes until a consensus was reached on overarching themes. Representative verbatim excerpts were selected to illustrate each theme.

RESULTS: Among 3,802 patients (46% THA, 54% TKA), mean age was 68.7 years, 55% were female, and mean body mass index was 30.9kg/m². Three-month postoperatively, 9% of patients were not satisfied with their surgical outcomes, with 6% categorized as Neutral and 3% categorized as Dissatisfied. Dissatisfied patients were older (71.0 vs 68.7 years) and had lower mean BMI (29.1 vs 31.0kg/m²) than Satisfied patients. Across the 31/52 THA patients that provided explanations for their dissatisfaction, the most common reasons were Adverse Events or Complications (26%), Persistent Discomfort or Pain (23%), and Unmet Patient Expectations (23%). Across the 40/66 TKA patients that provided explanations for their dissatisfaction, the most common reasons were Persistent Discomfort or Pain (35%), Stiffness or Limited Range of Motion (23%), and Adverse Events or Complications (15%). The most common adverse events were nerve injury (25%) and leg-length discrepancy (25%) for THA, and nerve injury (33%) and infection (17%) for TKA. Representative excerpts for each overarching theme are recorded in **Table 1**.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: Although overall satisfaction following THA and TKA was high, 3% of patients reported dissatisfaction with their surgical outcomes three-month postoperatively. Recurrent themes associated with patient-reported dissatisfaction included persistent pain, limitations in range of motion, leg length discrepancy, and infection.

Table 1. Representative Patient Excerpts for Each Identified Theme

Theme	Excerpts
Persistent Discomfort or Pain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Pain is out of control.” • “I have more pain now than I did before I had the surgery.” • “I’m still in a lot of discomfort with BOTH knees.”
Stiffness or Limited Range of Motion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I still can’t straighten my leg. I can’t bend it as much as I need to.” • “Less ROM than what I had before.” • “I am achy and not able to flex over 95 degrees.”
Prolonged Rehabilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I still have swelling in my knee and foot and ankle area’s.” • “I’ve had sustained pain and extremely slow progress in rehab.” • “Right now, my knee is the size of a volleyball. I feel worried and am in pain.”
Adverse Events or Complications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Cracked femur during surgery... 10 weeks on crutches.” • “My surgery leg continues to be longer than my non-surgical leg – which continues to throw my hip out causing severe pain.” • “Nerve injury is very painful – traded arthritis for neuropathy.”
Unmet Patient Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The goal of the surgery for me was to be able to walk free of pain. I am unable to do that at this time.” • “It’s been a very long and distressing experience and I am still NOT able to play tennis.” • “This procedure was supposed to make it better and it seems to have made it worse.”
Care Coordination Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Care from nursing staff at the facility is dreadful.” • “I have five different departments involved in my care, and they seem to rarely, if ever, communicate.” • “PT never showed how to do stairs or anything.”

Abbreviations: ROM = Range of Motion, PT = Physical Therapy.