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I'M ONE OF THE NEW HIP-OP GENERATION

Picture: DANIEL LYNCH

The numbers of under-60s having hip replacements is set to treble in the next 20 years. Olympic champion Steve Backley tells ADRIAN LEE how his new hip has changed his life

WHEN Steve Backley walked off the athletics field for the last time at the 2004 Olympics, he hoped he was also waving goodbye to pain.

Throughout his illustrious career, the javelin thrower reckons he was battling the effects of some sort of injury at least half of the time he competed.

"It's something most athletes learn to live with," says Steve, who went under the knife on nine occasions. "At the time you don't worry about the future or what you are putting your body through because you are pursuing a dream."

That sort of dedication brought Steve a clutch of medals and a world record before his body told him it was time to call it a day at the age of 35. For the last three years of his career Steve was dogged by an arthritic hip, the legacy of a childhood accident when he was struck by a car when he was eight, while crossing the road near his home in Kent. Three metal pins were used to mend the fractured hip but Steve knew there would be a price to pay.

"I was told by the surgeon that I'd probably have osteoarthritis in my hip by my mid-30s because the joint had been disrupted," he says. "Another surgeon told me that if he was going to design something that would wreck the human body, it would be the javelin. You are throwing 2lb of metal and the forces are massive."

"From 2001, I was in pain more and more. It radiated down my body to my knee. I can't say for sure but my hip problem probably was made worse by the sport."

"When I stopped chucking spears I hoped that it would stop hurting but retirement after the Sydney Olympics made no difference. By the end of that year the pain was so bad that I'd find excuses not to play golf."

At the time Steve and his wife Clare were also starting a family. He says: "I wanted to be able to do normal stuff like ride bikes with my kids and be able to crawl around with them on my back. I also wanted to be able to exercise."



CHALLENGE: Steve in Dancing On Ice with Susie Lipanova

Then aged 36, Steve had a type of surgery that is normally only required by much older people – a hip replacement. About 50,000 are carried out in the UK every year.

Until recently, those under 60 suffering joint pain from osteoarthritis were often told to live with it. The concern was that younger patients would wear out replacement joints after about 15 years and need one or even two revisions over their lifetime.

But techniques have improved and Steve was able to opt for a method pioneered in the UK, known as hip resurfacing. It means that his rebuilt hip should last for life. This new surgery does not involve drilling into the femur and preserves remaining healthy bone. The new section of hip is made from carbon-hardened steel.

The surgery, in late 2005, gave Steve a new lease of life. Within three months he was cycling, running and playing golf but took medical advice before subjecting the new joint to the ultimate test in ITV's Dancing On Ice this year.

"I was told there were risks but they were no more than for a normal joint," says Steve, 39. "My attitude was that I didn't have this operation so I could just sit on my hip."

TRAINING for the show also helped him shed a few pounds. Steve, who is 6ft 5in, is now about 10lb lighter than when he was at the peak of his sporting career. He has a mini-gym at his home and aims to do at least 20 minutes exercise every day on a rowing or cycling machine. He also loves yoga. "Any harm I did to my body throwing the javelin is far outweighed by the positives," he says. "I always took nutrition and fitness seriously so I could improve my performance. I'd still have the occasional beer and curry when I was competing but I used treats like that as a reward. Now, I still enjoy the effects of

exercise. I suppose it allows me to eat more food."

He says he will always encourage his own children, Ellese, four, and Sophia, two, to be active and eat healthily. "We aren't designed to sit in chairs or cars all day but that's what we do. I don't believe that being overweight is good for anyone. I do think that the western diet is a lot to blame. It's also too easy for kids not to do any exercise these days."

Steve rarely touches processed foods and tries to avoid unhealthy snacks, although he admits: "If there's any chocolate in the house I will nibble on it." He adores Thai and Japanese food, such as sushi, and eats plenty of fish and vegetables.

He regards the pain he endured before he had surgery on his hip as a wake-up call, reminding him to look after his body and

especially the joints that took a pounding when he was throwing the javelin for Britain.

When he competed, Steve took fish oils and vitamins. He now takes a daily joint supplement, Lubramine, containing a blend of lubricating fatty acids which improve mobility and reduce inflammation within joints.

"I regard it as an insurance policy," says Steve, who also suffered knee, shoulder and elbow injuries caused by throwing. "The osteoarthritis was only in my hip and I have no reason to think other areas of my body will be affected but I want to do everything I can to look after my health as I get older."

● Lubramine costs £9.99 for 30 capsules, available from most Boots & Superdrug stores. www.lubramine.com

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