

New hip let me have a baby..

A childhood condition left Karen's bones so weak she thought she'd have to get married on crutches. Until a new operation put her back on her feet. By JILL PALMER

I T was only a short walk up the aisle, but for 27-year-old Karen Ricketts it was a major achievement.

Five years earlier, Karen had been diagnosed with osteoarthritis, a disease that usually affects pensioners.

The X-rays showed her hips looking more like an 80-year-old's than a young woman's. And, worst of all, doctors said her condition meant she could never have children.

A conventional hip replacement was unsuitable for Karen, but three months before her wedding she had an operation to insert a new type of artificial hip.

And she knew the operation had worked when she stepped out to enjoy her first dance with new husband Mark.

"It was fantastic," says Karen, now 30, from Birmingham. "I had been really concerned about the wedding. I so wanted to walk up the aisle but my hips were so bad that it seemed increasingly unlikely."

"Now the operation has given me my life back."

Karen was 22 when her condition was diagnosed. It was the result of congenital dislocation of the hips, an instability of the hip joint which affects about 400 in every 100,000 babies.

Nowadays the condition is treated in early infancy with light splints applied to thighs, but when Karen was born, therapy was less successful.

Although she suffered no problems as a child, the disorder gradually wore away her hip joints, until in her early 20s she found it difficult to walk.

"The pain started like a dull ache but over the next couple of years it got worse and worse until eventually I was crippled with pain and inflammation," says Karen.

"I was unable to stand still for more than a few minutes, and walking was excruciatingly painful. I was limping and hobbling all the time. I had to give up my job as a chef



MOBILE: Karen with one-year-old Ellie. Inset: at her wedding, three weeks after the double hip operation

Picture: NEVILLE WILLIAMS



because I was unable to stand for the shift.

"I could no longer play tennis, which I loved. And night-clubbing and dancing were out of the question. It totally restricted my everyday life. I lived on strong painkillers and anti-inflammatory drugs. Even then some nights I was in so much pain I had to crawl up the stairs on my hands and knees. The way my

condition was deteriorating I was heading for a wheelchair by the age of 30. All I was told was that I was too young for a hip replacement.

"But I didn't want to stay in pain until I was old. I wanted a better quality of life while I was still young."

As Karen and Mark planned their wedding she became increasingly concerned that she would not make it up the aisle. Then came

the devastating news that the state of her hips was so bad that it was unlikely she could sustain a pregnancy and that even if she did, she would never be able to give birth naturally.

"That was the final straw. We both wanted children and intended to start a family as soon as we were married," says Karen. "To be told that the state of my hips would probably prevent that

was the worst thing I'd ever heard. I just burst into tears."

It was then that Karen heard about hip resurfacing, and discovered that the inventor of the procedure, Derek McMinn, was in her home town of Birmingham.

At that point, the procedure was only available privately. But Karen, who worked at the BUPA Parkway hospital in Solihull, Birmingham - first as a chef and later in the computer department - had medical cover through her job.

So three years ago, Karen had surgery on both her hips within a week of each other.

Traditional hip replacements wear out. That doesn't matter so much in older people, who rarely outlive their artificial hips, but it is a problem for younger patients.

But the new treatment, known as the Birmingham Hip because Mr McMinn developed it at the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital in Birmingham, conserves more bone, is less likely to dislocate, allows the patient more mobility and lasts longer.

It has been available privately for a decade but now the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, which approves treatments for the NHS, has given the procedure its seal of approval.

It agreed that the Birmingham Hip is the preferred NHS treatment in younger, more active patients.

About 4,500 patients a year are expected to benefit. The procedure involves removal of the diseased or

damaged surfaces of the hip joint. A metal cap is then fitted over the ball of the hip joint with cement.

This slots into a metal liner in the hip socket using hydroxyapatite, a synthetic bone into which the surrounding bone grows.

Mr McMinn says: "Hip resurfacing works best in those patients who do worst with hip replacement."

"It is not suitable for older patients because their bone quality and strength is not good enough."

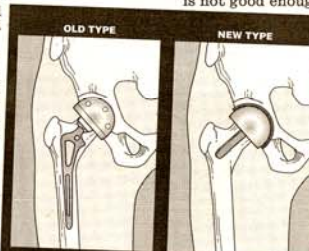
"Recovery is much quicker and because less bone is cut away from patients' own hips it leaves the way open for doing a full hip replacement later in life if necessary."

For Karen, the best thing about her new hips is that her dream of a family has come true.

Her daughter, Ellie, was born a year ago after a trouble-free pregnancy and a natural birth.

"The operation revolutionised my life. It is brilliant," said Karen. "My hips were flexible enough for me to give birth naturally without any difficulties."

"And I can run around after Ellie like any other mum would. I am no longer disabled."



JOINT ACCOUNT: Total hip replacements, left, wear out faster than the new Birmingham hip

'To be told my hips would prevent me from having a baby was the worst thing I'd ever heard. I just cried'

● For details of surgeons trained in implanting the Birmingham Hip, call Midland Medical Technologies on 0121 414 2298 or go to www.midmedtec.co.uk

● Arthritis Care 0800 800 4050 or www.arthritiscare.org.uk

● Arthritis Research 0870 850 5000 or www.arc.org.uk