

# Goodyear girl on cutting edge

*Learning to swallow again*

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The Arizona Republic, Goodyear, AZ

Feb. 26, 2005 12:00 AM

There was no hint of trouble until Evelyn Meyer, a 2-year-old Goodyear girl with a fetching smile, was 9 months old.

That's when her physical development completely stalled, and she began to regress, even losing the ability to eat.

Five months later, her worried parents, Michael and Laurie Meyer, found out what was wrong with their little girl.

Evelyn was diagnosed with Rett Syndrome, a neurological disorder first described in 1983 and one that almost always affects young girls.

The cause is unknown, and the disease usually goes unspotted until a child is 6 to 18 months old and starts to lose communication and other kinds of skills.

One problem is dysphagia, a difficulty in swallowing.

Evelyn may never walk or talk, but she is learning how to eat again, something the parents view as big progress.

"It's our dream for her to be able to eat by mouth," Michael said. "We would like for her to have as much of a normal life as possible."

Evelyn is nourished through a feeding tube attached to her stomach above the navel.

Now she is undergoing therapy at Phoenix Children's Hospital to regain the ability to eat.

She was definitely the center of attention last week as she sat in a high chair, took a few small spoonfuls of applesauce and nibbled at a cracker.

"She has been every happy to get food again," Laurie said. "We started with pudding and just anything with flavor, and she was very excited."

A hospital therapist is attacking Evelyn's eating problem with an electrical device that stimulates the throat muscles.

Evelyn is among the first few children being treated at the hospital with VitalStim Therapy, a device cleared for use by the Food and Drug Administration in late 2002.

Pamela Clarke-Levens, a speech therapist, said that during weekly sessions, electrodes are attached to Evelyn's throat muscles.

The device sends out impulses that contract the muscles responsible for swallowing, she said.

"Our goal is to slowly increase what she takes by mouth so she can get as much nutrition as she can handle that way," Clarke-Levens said.

The same type of swallowing therapy is used for stroke survivors, people with neurological disorders or suffering with head and neck cancer.

Wendy Elliott, the hospital's manager of rehabilitation services, said there is hope that the therapy also can be used for premature babies who lack swallowing abilities.

They aren't released from the hospital until they can take nourishment on their own, Elliott said. VitalStim Therapy may result in shorter stays.

In the meantime, Michael and Laurie, both 36, cradle a 4-month-old daughter, Kendra, while watching Evelyn's therapy.

The father said Evelyn is able to make choices and signal the kinds of food that she likes.

"Her favorite is pears," he said. "She has an affinity for pears but really dislikes licorice-flavored applesauce."

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