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Inability to swallow can lead to many ailments

Medical Q&A: Electric therapy can re-educate throat muscles to take liquids for people suffering from dysphagia.

By Juliana Goodwin

News-Leader

This week's medical expert is Susan Schaefer, speech pathologist with Citizens Memorial Hospital in Bolivar.

Q. What is dysphagia?

A. Dysphagia is an inability to swallow properly. When weak muscles in the throat cannot move all of the food to the stomach, it can fall or be pulled into the windpipe which could lead to a lung infection, possibly pneumonia. Many patients with dysphagia end up with a feeding tube placed directly into their stomach because they are not able to take in any kind of nutrition or fluids on their own.

Q. How many people have dysphagia?

A. In the United States, approximately 15 million people. Every year more than 60,000 people die due to complications with dysphagia.

Q. What causes dysphagia?

A. Dysphagia can be found in people of all ages. The most common condition that causes the disease is stroke. Patients who undergo radiation as a result of head and neck cancer also can be at risk. Some children are born with the disease. If the condition is not taken care of it can lead to pneumonia, malnutrition, dehydration, a decrease in the quality of life and possibly death caused by asphyxia.

Q. What is VitalStim treatment?

A. The VitalStim treatment was created by Marcy Freed of University Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. VitalStim uses electrical currents to re-educate the muscles around the throat in order to create the patterns in the muscles necessary to restore swallowing. The average person swallows approximately 2,000 times a day and intakes five gallons of saliva each day. VitalStim treatment enables the throat muscles to intake this, plus daily nutrition and fluids.

Q. Who is a candidate for this?

A. A child or adult on a feeding tube, thickened liquids or on a modified consistency diet. Also, someone with a history of pneumonia, someone who drools, someone who complains that food gets stuck in the throat or someone who has had a stroke. People with Parkinson's disease, a traumatic brain injury, multiple sclerosis, mouth or throat cancer, Lou Gehrig's disease, cerebral palsy or other degenerative and neuromuscular conditions are also candidates.

Q. How is this treatment unique?



Susan Schaefer (right), speech pathologist with Citizens Memorial Hospital in Bolivar, examines Michelle Cansler, who works in the CMH Administrative Center.
Citizens Memorial Hospital

A. This treatment brings hope to those who have been told that they would suffer from dysphagia for the rest of their life. The most amazing part of this treatment is that people see results in just a few sessions.

Q. Who can administer VitalStim treatments?

A. In order to provide the therapy, each therapist must attend a two-day certification course. CMH currently has 10 therapists certified to administer this therapy. Treatment is available at the hospital in Bolivar, in Hermitage, in Buffalo and in El Dorado.

Q. What treatment was formerly used?

A. Traditional methods to treat dysphagia involved conventional speech therapy and oral exercises, patient education, swallowing maneuvers (such as tucking the chin and swallowing) and diet modifications. For example, this may have required a person to tilt his or her chin down while swallowing, eat only pureed foods or drink only thickened liquids.

Thermal stimulation (i.e., application of cold to the throat area) had a high success rate of temporarily restoring most of the swallowing functions. In most of these moderate to severe cases a percutaneous endoscopic gastronomy tube, or feeding tube, was necessary to provide nourishment to the patients.

Q. How much does this treatment cost?

A. This treatment costs the same as traditional speech therapy, with the exception of the electrodes, which are \$20 per set.

Q. Is this a relatively new form of treatment?

A. The treatment received Food and Drug Administration approval in 2001.

Q. How soon do patients start seeing results?

A. Most patients see improvement in six to 20 sessions, with more than 80 percent of those seeing positive outcomes.

Q. How long does a session last?

A. The average session lasts 45 to 60 minutes.

Q. Is it painful at all?

A. No, the therapy is painless and noninvasive. The electrical stimulation is set at a level that is comfortable for the patient. The patient may feel a little pressure and a slight tingling.