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New treatment restores stroke victims' ability to eat, drink

Therapy also helps MS and cerebral palsy patients

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After her stroke, Laura June Hollopeter struggled to speak, and swallowing food and liquid made her gag.

"I couldn't talk for a day or two. I would think everything I wanted to say," the Lebanon woman recalled. "It was up there in that brain, but I couldn't get it out. ... I was scared."

Hollopeter's speech slowly returned, but she still couldn't eat most foods. A new treatment that uses electrical currents to stimulate neck muscles, however, helped her learn to swallow again.

"When she left the hospital she had difficulty swallowing and could only eat soft foods, like mashed potatoes and applesauce," said Marisa Chandler, a speech language pathologist at Summit Medical Center. "She came to us on an outpatient basis. On the sixth treatment, she came back and told me she ate a bratwurst."

With VitalStim, a therapy approved by the FDA, electrodes are placed on the surface of the throat. The electrical current stimulates the muscles responsible for swallowing, which trains them to function again, Chandler said.

Electrodes can also be placed on the face to stimulate muscles that allow people to smile, pucker, enunciate, and puff out their cheeks.

The treatment is used in combination with speech therapy.

"Before, we saw good results," Chandler said. "Now, we see great results."

About 1 million Americans are disabled because of a stroke, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Southeast has been dubbed the "stroke belt" because strokes are more common here than in other parts of the country.

In addition to stroke patients, the therapy can be used on people with neuromuscular diseases such as multiple sclerosis and cerebral palsy.

Chandler said people who have difficulty swallowing are at risk for malnutrition and other health problems. Food and liquid can go into the lungs instead of the stomach, for example, causing pneumonia.

When function does not improve, a feeding tube is sometimes required.

"Eating is one of the biggest social aspects of our lives," Chandler said. "When that's taken away, there may be depression. There may be anger involved."

Medicare and private insurance cover the treatment, which can last from one to several months. Chandler said it might not be appropriate for people with pacemakers or a history of seizures.

Hollopeter credits the therapy with helping her recover from the stroke she had in June. She said she can now eat whatever she wants.

"I hesitated to swallow for fear I couldn't get it down," she said. "Liquids and pills were especially difficult. After a while, I could swallow the pills. I had no problem with it." •