

New system shows positive results for some with swallowing disorders

By Pamela Berry

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Dr. Mark Agrama said he has one problem with a new electrotherapy system designed to treat people with swallowing disorders: "I wish they'd made it sooner."

Since January, the ear, nose and throat surgeon at River Regional Health Center in Vicksburg said he's been ordering use of the VitalStim Therapy system for patients who have a condition called dysphagia as the result of a variety of illnesses such as a stroke, Parkinson's disease and head injuries.

An estimated 15 million adults in the United States have difficulty swallowing. Current treatment for the disorder includes conventional speech therapy, patient education, swallowing maneuvers and diet modifications.

"I've requested VitalStim on several of my patients who have severe swallowing disorders and have seen results that have been uniformly positive," Agrama said. "These are some people who have, in some cases, required feeding tubes, and while it has not completely restored them to normal, in many cases, it has helped return them to their regular diet."

Two weeks ago, speech pathologists and other health officials from across the state were trained to use the new system during the first certification offered in the Jackson area.

One of them, Kara Brister, a speech pathologist at River Regional, said the two-day training would give her a chance to improve treatment for her patients.

"They're always coming out with new technology, but this is something that addresses some deficits for something we've not been able to work directly with in the past," Brister said. "It's going to open some new doors for people who have been very limited on what they can eat and some people who'd lost their ability to eat at all."

Frances Austin-Archer, a speech language pathologist at River Region who'd received her training last fall in New Orleans for the VitalStim, said the new technology is such a good tool because of its ability to reach and retrain muscles that previously were difficult to improve.

The Food and Drug Administration-approved system uses electrodes applied to the pharyngeal muscles in the throat with special tape. The electrical impulses from the small, portable device can be used to tell specific muscles what to do.

Most patients will need between 10 to 14 sessions to see improvement while some will need as few as two sessions.

"When something comes along and stops you from eating, it's really a problem," Austin-Archer said. "I had one patient who was eating regular foods, but choking on everything. After about five treatments, he's had no episodes. Every patient may not be appropriate, but it's been a good tool to add to our other resources."



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