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New therapy fosters ability to swallow

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ARLINGTON--A thick, juicy steak tops the list of foods that Ray Hall can hardly wait to eat now that he can swallow again.

It's a simple pleasure that Hall thought he might never enjoy again after a stroke left him without the ability to swallow. But a new therapy using electrical stimulation to re-educate the throat muscles has allowed Hall to swallow and eat again.

"When I tried this, it seemed too easy, just too good," said Hall, 60. "But after three visits I could swallow food; after 17, I was almost perfect and back to normal."

Conventional therapies for dysphagia - a swallowing disorder that affects approximately 15 million people and causes 60,000 deaths a year -- involve complex exercises that are very uncomfortable for the patient, said Tracie Hunnicutt, a senior speech therapist at HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital of Arlington, where Hall received treatment.

With the new therapy, called VitalStim, electrical stimulation strengthens the muscles and speeds the ability to swallow, Hunnicutt said. Patients typically need 10 to 14 therapy sessions, but some see improvements after three visits, Hunnicutt said.

The Food and Drug Administration approved the device in 2001 and training began last year. About 700 people have been trained nationwide, but only a few hospitals in north Texas are offering the therapy, said Ed Dunlay, vice president of marketing for the Chattanooga Group, which manufactures the equipment.

An Ohio speech pathologist and marathon runner developed the device by applying technology commonly used to stimulate leg muscles.

The FDA required extensive research to demonstrate safety and efficacy because neuromuscular stimulation to the throat has been contra-indicated, Dunlay said. Independent studies are now under way.

"In five years of research, no adverse effects were found," Dunlay said. "Over 70 percent of patients went on to some sort of full oral intake."

Nonetheless, more research is needed, said Janet Brown, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's director of health care services.

"At this point, one article has been published in a journal, and that was by the person who developed it," she said.

The therapy can be used on patients of all ages, although not on patients who cannot speak or who have chronic acid reflux, said Michelle Vasquez, a HealthSouth speech therapist.

Dysphagia is common among stroke patients with about 75 percent of survivors developing the swallowing disorder. About 75 percent of cancer patients who undergo radiation to the throat also develop the disorder.

"It can be used for someone who had a stroke yesterday or cancer 20 years ago and has never swallowed since," Hunnicutt said.

During the therapy, electrodes are placed on the throat to activate swallowing muscles. The patient experiences a tingling sensation during the 30-minute procedure.

Hall, who had a stroke in October during surgery to remove plaque from his carotid artery, had not eaten anything in six weeks when he began therapy. After three sessions, he began to swallow and eat pureed foods. He progressed from there.

"I wanted steak, but the closest we could get was finely ground beef and mashed potatoes," he said.

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