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Vital Stim -- Full-Length Doctor's Interview

Pamela Clarke-Levens, M.D., discusses VitalStim, a new swallowing rehabilitation treatment that electrically stimulates the muscles in the neck.

Ivanhoe Broadcast News Transcript with

Pamela Clarke-Levens, M.D., Clinical Coordinator of Speech Pathology,
Phoenix Children's Hospital, Phoenix,

TOPIC: Vital Stim

What is VitalStim?

Dr. Clarke-Levens: The device we use is called a VitalStim unit. The unit does neuromuscular electrical stimulation, which we use for swallowing rehabilitation. To use the device, the patient attached the electrodes to the neck or the throat area. The electrodes give stimulation to the thorengial musculature and also the muscles in the pharynx and the throat area. This allows the patient, to get a stronger, timelier swallow, as well as a more effective swallow.

Who does VitalStim benefit the most?

Dr. Clarke-Levens: So many children with dysphagia, or swallowing disorder, are able to benefit and have improved swallowing coordination from the VitalStim therapy.

Can this procedure help more than children with strep throat?

Dr. Clarke-Levens: Yes. The VitalStim unit is used with many children and adults who have swallowing difficulties. My particular clinical practice only deals with infants and children, but it is also used by many speech pathologists working with the adult population. It's not limited to a medical diagnosis; it's more geared towards a swallowing diagnosis.

What happens during the first appointment with a child believed to have a swallowing problem?

Dr. Clarke-Levens: The first thing we do at Phoenix Children's Hospital, is have a modified barium swallow study done, which is an x-ray done collaboratively with the speech pathologist and the pediatric radiologist. In this swallowing x-ray, we can see where the food is going, and diagnose the swallowing dysfunction. Once the speech pathologist makes the diagnosis of the type of swallowing dysfunction the child has, they make a recommendation as to whether the child is a candidate for the VitalStim therapy.

When the child comes here to our office the therapy begins. We talk to the parents, we tell them about the procedure and move forward with the therapy at the very first session.

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What do you feed the children while the electrodes are on their neck?

Dr. Clarke-Levens: Marcy Freed, the speech pathologist who also developed the VitalStim unit, developed the therapy protocol we follow, which focuses on textures of food and liquid. Children are given different textures in the therapy, depending on their different type of swallowing strength and weaknesses.

How long will it take until they are able to swallow normal food?

Dr. Clarke-Levens: The nice thing about the VitalStim therapy is that you are stimulating the swallowing muscle, and once it becomes stronger the child can consume more textures and thicker consistencies.

How does this help adults?

Dr. Clarke-Levens: Adults with strokes, neurological disorders, and head and neck cancers are good candidates for this therapy.

What types of illnesses do children you typically treat have?

Dr. Clarke-Levens: We have had success-treating children with pharyngeal phase dysphagia, genetic disorders, such as Rett's syndrome, developmental delays, and also children who developed prematurely in early infancy and can't feed normally.

Does the testing hurt the child?

Dr. Clarke-Levens: No. It doesn't hurt.

What does the child feel?

Dr. Clarke-Levens: They feel a pulsing, or a type of grabbing sensation. To become certified for administering this test, physicians and speech pathologists take a 20-hour course. As a part of the training, each person has to put the electrodes on their neck, allowing each doctor to physically feel what it is like to go through the therapy. While there are different sensations you experience when the electrodes are on, it's a painless therapy. Also, because the patients are eating during the therapy, they actually enjoy it very much. In fact they don't realize we are actually strengthening their swallowing, they think they're just here to eat.

Are there any risks?

Dr. Clarke-Levens: There are no risks that I know of.

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END OF INTERVIEW

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