

In-home therapy helps a toddler chew her food
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SMITHFIELD, N.C. _ Home Health and Hospice Care, Inc., or 3HC, has brought VitalStim, a new swallowing therapy, to Johnston County. And the results have been nothing short of amazing.

Take for instance 2-year-old Kaylee Craig.

Kaylee was born with a rare genetic disorder - mitochondrial disease - that affects the body's ability to produce energy.

Kaylee experienced respiratory problems and was placed on a ventilator to help with breathing. She also received a feeding tube because she had no energy to swallow.

Starting in mid-January, 3HC therapist Chareen Monk began VitalStim treatments with Kaylee. After the third sessions, Kaylee was able to suck on a bottle and swallow one ounce of formula by mouth. After 10 sessions, not only can she drink from a bottle, Kaylee can now eat Ritz crackers, cheese puffs and stage 2 baby foods.

In the United States, an estimated 15 million people suffer from dysphagia, resulting in discomfort, pain and difficulty swallowing. Eating becomes a challenge because liquids, foods and even saliva cannot be processed through normal means, and food particles might become trapped in the lungs, resulting in dehydration, malnutrition and aspiration pneumonia.

VitalStim therapy stimulates nerves in the throat muscles. Small electrodes are applied externally to the muscles used for swallowing. The electronic impulses retrain and reeducate these muscles to assist in the swallowing process.

The goal of VitalStim therapy is for patients to swallow foods and liquids safely so they will enter the stomach and not the airway and lungs.

VitalStim therapy is designed for patients with illnesses such as traumatic brain injury, mouth or throat cancer, degenerative muscle conditions, Parkinson's disease, ALS, stroke and Multiple Sclerosis.

After a referral by a physician, a medical practitioner certified in VitalStim therapy administers the treatment.

"I want as many people to benefit from this therapy as possible," said Monk, the 3HC therapist. "Other facilities in our area provide this treatment in an inpatient and outpatient setting, but 3HC is the only agency doing this in the comfort of the patient's home."

Typically, patients will undergo 10 VitalStim treatments, but they may receive up to 20. "3HC's policy is for the patient to receive up to six treatments, then return to the hospital for a follow-up swallowing test ... to determine the effectiveness of the treatment," Monk said. "Depending on the results, treatment is continued as needed."

Swallowing might seem like a mindless task to some people. To Kaylee Craig and her family, swallowing is a miracle.

For more information on VitalStim therapy, visit www.vitalstimtherapy.com.