



Home > News > Therapy helps those who struggle with the simple act of swallowing

NEWS



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Therapy helps those who struggle with the simple act of swallowing

By Sarah Swedberg
The Examiner

Take the electrodes used for leg and arm muscle stimulation, shrink them and tweak the tool and dysphagia sufferers can add quality back into their lives.

VitalStim is the first treatment for swallowing problems cleared by the FDA. It uses small electrical currents to stimulate and re-educate the muscles responsible for swallowing.

"It doesn't normally hurt," said Jack Sigler of Blue Springs. "You can feel it working the muscles."

Sigler was the first outpatient at St. Mary's Medical Center to use the new swallowing therapy.

"It's made a tremendous difference," the 79-year-old said. "I was at a place where I was reluctant to eat, but then I had some coughing and aspiration. It was sometimes embarrassing."

Sigler's swallowing problems were caused by a stroke 12 years ago, which also left him with some speech impediments among other impairments to his body's right side.

Since VitalStim did not exist he relied on traditional therapies such

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Jack Sigler demonstrates the VitalStim therapy at St. Mary's Medical Center in Blue Springs.

as tongue and lip exercises, swallowing maneuvers which included tucking the chin toward the body, and making diet changes, which included pureeing food and thickening liquids.

"I sure wish I had this, he said, adding, "once you have a stroke you have to rush (with starting therapy) or things start falling a part."

Then VitalStim offered Sigler another opportunity to improve himself in a short amount of time.

"After the treatment, I've surprised myself," Sigler said. "I've been able to sing the melody of songs during church with the congregation. It was a shock to me that I could sing."

In order to have VitalStim, Anderson said a doctor must order it.

"If a doctor has a patient with swallowing problems, they refer them to us and we do a video swallowing study," she said. "The test tells us where to place the electrodes - which can be placed on the face or anterior neck muscles. It really depends on their swallowing problems."

"Ideally you want them to eat with it on if they can," she said, adding, "the best therapy to swallow is to swallow."

The intensity of the electrical currents can be controlled, but everything else is already programmed. The therapy lasts up to 60 minutes.

"It's a way to get to these smaller muscles without anything evasive," Anderson said, adding, "they are still doing studies on it and not everybody is a candidate, depending on their condition and the severity of it."

Hospital outpatients are treated three times a week and inpatients five days a week. The amount of 60-minute sessions vary widely, with six sessions being the least amount and 24 sessions being the most, but the average is 12, Anderson said.

Another video swallowing study is done at the end of the therapy to measure improvements.

"You shouldn't have to have a tune up, the effects are lasting unless something else was to happen," Anderson said.

For many people who have suffered a stroke, brain tumor, neurological condition such as Parkinson's disease or multiple sclerosis and head and neck cancer, VitalStim may provide relief to those on feeding tubes or modified diets who want to advance to a normal diet.

"My doctor was very interested in what it was about and very supportive," Sigler said, adding, "I started feeling the effect of it almost immediately. After the first session, I went home and I could tell something was different."

"It's the only therapy I know where you can eat," he said. "I really like that."

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