

VitalStim treatment assists people with swallowing disorders

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People with swallowing disorders are finding unprecedented relief from a new treatment that uses electrical impulses to retrain throat muscles, local health professionals say.

Called VitalStim, the treatment method has been in use in the Waco area for about 18 months. But local speech pathologists who met with a pioneer of the treatment Thursday said many Central Texans still don't know about it.

Dysphagia, a term encompassing a variety of swallowing disorders, affects an estimated 15 million Americans. About 60,000 people die from complications annually, health experts say.

The disorder can occur in people at any age but is more common in the elderly. About 75 percent of stroke patients and 90 percent of people with neurological diseases like Parkinson's experience it at some point, according to information from VitalStim.

Locally, at least 100 people with dysphagia have been treated with the VitalStim method, said Jean Reboli, a speech language pathologist at Providence Park in Waco. About eight local speech pathologists are among the 3,000 certified nationwide, she said.

They include professionals affiliated with Waco's Hillcrest Health System and Providence Healthcare Network, as well as area Veterans Affairs hospitals and local nursing homes.

VitalStim, which was cleared for use in 2002, works by placing electrodes on patients' face and neck. An electrical current is then delivered to the motor nerves of the throat, causing the swallowing muscles to contract. At the same time, a speech pathologist guides the patient through swallowing therapy to further re-train the muscles.

Treatments are usually done three to five times per week, for as much as an hour at a time, Reboli said. They are not painful, with patients feeling a tingling or pulling sensation, she said.

Some patients see dramatic improvement after just four or five sessions, said Marcy Freed, who pioneered the technology and was at Providence Park Thursday to answer questions from local practitioners. On average, though, patients need 12-14 sessions to see improvement, she said.

"If the muscles are not used, they begin to atrophy within 72 hours," Freed said. "Once they stop working, they need something to jump start it (the swallowing function) again."

Local speech pathologists said they often accomplish more with VitalStim than traditional therapies. Traditional methods include speech therapy, swallowing maneuvers and diet modifications, such as pureeing food.

Reboli said the first person she treated with VitalStim is a good example. He developed dysphagia following a stroke and could not eat or talk. With the help of VitalStim, he can now do both, she said.

Laura Meier-Marx, a speech pathologist at Lake Shore Village in Waco, also said she has also seen remarkable progress in patients. One man she used VitalStim with hadn't consumed anything but certain liquids for three years. After eight weeks of treatment, he could consume all liquids, she said.

"We've had real good success with Parkinson's patients, stroke patients and getting people off PEG (percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy feeding) tubes," Meier-Marx said.

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