

Healthplex offers treatment for swallowing disorders

By Carey Gardner

Just as physical therapy has helped hundreds of patients regain use of their arms and legs, a new speech therapy program at the Union Hospital Healthplex in Dover is helping patients regain their ability to swallow.

Cara Winters, a certified speech therapist at the Healthplex, says Vital-Stim therapy is a new treatment option for patients who suffer from dysphasia, a disorder preventing the patient from swallowing some or any food or liquid.

“An estimated 15 million Americans, and nearly three-quarters of stroke survivors are affected by a swallowing disorder,” Winters said.

The Vital-Stim therapy has an excellent record of helping to restore swallowing function to patients where traditional therapies have failed.

Gino S. Riley of Newcomerstown knows all too well about failed therapies. As the result of head injuries sustained in a severe automobile accident in October 2004, Riley lost his ability to swallow.

“I could not take any food or liquid by mouth,” Riley said. “I survived with a feeding tube while going to three different therapy programs, all of which said I’d probably never eat again.”

Riley was referred to Winters at the Union Hospital Healthplex, who started Riley on Vital-Stim therapy three times a week. Within a few weeks, Riley was able to start swallowing small amounts of liquid and soft foods, progressing each week until he was able to eat and drink normally.

“It’s a miracle,” Riley said as he was completing one of his last weeks of therapy. “Without Cara and the Vital-Stim therapy, I would have spent the rest of my life with a feeding tube in my body.”

In addition to people injured in accidents, Winters said the Vital-Stim therapy can help many people with progressive illnesses such as ALS and Parkinson's disease, as well as stroke and cancer patients.

The therapy process retrains the muscles in the throat to produce the swallowing motion. Small electrodes are placed on the patient's throat, stimulating the inactive or atrophied muscles responsible for swallowing. Like exercise of any other muscle, the series of therapy treatments gradually strengthens the throat muscles to produce the motions needed to swallow.

"It feels like a little pull," Riley said of the electrical stimulation of his throat. "But all I do for the therapy session is sit here, munch on some potato chips, sip on a milk shake, and swallow it down."

Winters said the typical Vital-Stim process includes three 60-minute therapy sessions per week for four weeks. Along with the electrical stimulation, the speech therapist administers rehabilitation therapy to further retrain the throat muscles.

"The restoration of Mr. Riley's swallowing ability is similar to the success we've seen in other patients here," Winters said. "I'm very excited for Gino and all my patients who now can eat and drink again like the rest of us. It's something that we take for granted until we lose the ability to swallow through an accident or illness."

Winters said therapy for swallowing disorders is available to a patient with a doctor's order. For more information, patients should call Union Hospital Healthplex at (330) 602-0719.

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