



VitalStim treatment
helps stroke patients
enjoy eating again

HARD TO SWALLOW?

BY JOHN BERGGREN

Sitting down and enjoying a meal with friends and loved ones is something many people take for granted. But what if you couldn't swallow? It's not as uncommon as you might think.

It's estimated that between 50 and 75 percent of stroke survivors are left with a compromised ability to swallow. Some can't even drink water. People who have undergone treatment for head or neck cancer and those who have experienced surgical trauma to the neck, such as a tracheotomy to maintain breathing, also experience difficulty ingesting food. Neurological disorders like Parkinson's disease can also be to blame. Even old age can take a toll on the ability to eat normally.

Regardless of the cause, the reason many have difficulty swallowing is because the muscles in the throat do not constrict properly. Normally this is a motor skill that our body initiates as food travels from the mouth into the esophagus.

Though choking and gagging are obvious signs of a swallowing problem, sometimes the onset is more subtle, especially when the ability to eat gradually declines with old age. Watery eyes or a runny nose while eating or a vocal change after eating can be a sign of a swallowing problem.

Diagnosing a swallowing abnormality is easily accomplished with a Modified Barium Swallowing Study. The study has patients drink a contrast solution in various thicknesses while X-ray video is used to record how muscles in the throat react during the process. This allows radiologists and speech therapists to determine how the muscles are either working or not working.

A LONG ROAD TO RECOVERY

Sixty-seven-year-old Douglas Wilson of Salina went into the hospital for an aortic valve replacement, but complications after surgery caused him to

aspirate secretions from his mouth into his lungs and he developed pneumonia. To protect his airway, doctors had to perform a tracheotomy (place a breathing tube in his neck). Doctors also believed Wilson might have had a minor stroke either during or after his surgery.

After spending weeks in the hospital, Wilson was able to go home with the breathing tube in his neck and a feeding tube in his stomach to get needed nourishment.

“I just couldn’t swallow anything—even water,” Wilson says. “I remember putting soup in my mouth and swishing it around just to get the taste of something. I had to take all my fluids in through the feeding tube and I lost almost 30 pounds by the time it was over.”

Wilson began working with Salina Regional speech therapist Christy Acheson while he was still in the hospital and continued working with her on an outpatient basis after he went home. Acheson used VitalStim electrical stimulation therapy on Wilson to retrain the muscles in his throat to contract and swallow again.

With VitalStim, low-voltage electrodes are placed on the neck of a patient and small amounts of current are used to stimulate the muscles responsible for swallowing. Patients only feel a numbing sensation on their neck during VitalStim treatment.

The treatment is done in conjunction with neck and tongue exercises that also work to retrain the muscles in the throat.

“Before VitalStim came along, all we had were different exercise techniques to try to help people regain swallowing ability,” Acheson says. “The techniques worked in mild cases, but results were often slow. Mr. Wilson’s swallowing deficit was so severe that I doubt he ever would have been able to relearn to swallow without this treatment.”

Nearly eight months passed from the time of Wilson’s initial surgery to the time he was able to drink water again.

“I remember about halfway through the treatments I began to wonder if it would ever work,” Wilson says. “But I hated having that feeding tube going into my stomach and being unable to go out to eat with friends.

“When that first gulp of water went down I was excited, so I took another drink and it went down too. I was ecstatic,” Wilson says.

In the following weeks, Wilson’s swallowing ability continued to improve and eventually doctors removed his breathing and feeding tubes. Now Wilson can eat anything he wishes, which helped him regain all his weight, and he can once again take long walks or ride horses like he has always enjoyed.

MANY PATIENTS FIND RESULTS FASTER

While Wilson’s story is one of the most extreme examples of patient success, many patients experience results with the treatment much more quickly. Stroke patients have gone from the inability to swallow anything to total swallowing function in just four weeks.

Treatment is often started while patients are still in the hospital, but many continue therapy on an outpatient basis once sent home. Generally, treatments are given four or five days a week and sessions last 30 to 45 minutes.

“I’d say most patients get good results from VitalStim within about eight weeks,” Acheson says. “We see a lot of stroke patients and head and neck cancer patients for this treatment, but what a lot of people don’t realize is that many older people develop swallowing issues simply from age. They can benefit from VitalStim as well.”

COULD VITALSTIM HELP YOU?



To learn more about VitalStim electrical stimulation, visit vitalstim.com or call Salina Regional’s speech therapy department at **785-452-7818**.



Salina Regional speech therapist Christy Acheson works with Douglas Wilson using VitalStim electrical stimulation therapy to improve swallowing ability.

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