

NEW TECHNOLOGY OFFERS HOPE FOR DYSPHAGIA PATIENTS

An estimated 15 million Americans are afflicted with dysphagia, a medical condition that causes discomfort or difficulty swallowing. As many as 600,000 new cases are diagnosed annually. Many more suffer from the condition, but are undiagnosed and untreated.

In its most severe form, patients entirely lose their ability to swallow and a feeding tube is required to receive nourishment. Over 60,000 deaths each year are related to dysphagia.

Dysphagia is common among stroke survivors; patients with neurological disorders like Parkinson's disease, Lou Gehrig's disease, and multiple sclerosis; patients with head and neck cancer; and the elderly. More than 40 percent of dysphagia patients are over the age of 60. An estimated 75 percent of all nursing home residents suffer to some degree from the condition.

Speech language pathologist Marcia Snyder, M.S., CCC-SLP, began treating dysphagia in 2000 while working with nursing home patients. Traditional treatments included swallowing exercises, thermal-tactile gustatory stimulation, and cutting food into small pieces or pureeing it so it will pass more easily down the throat.

"Those methods provided limited degrees of success," Marcia says. She's also observed impairment in patients' social functioning because of the condition. "Dysphagia patients often avoid social activities involving meals," Marcia states. "For patients in nursing homes, it's especially troublesome because mealtime is one of the most important social gatherings."

Marcia learned about a new and effective treatment for dysphagia called VitalStim Therapy, which uses neuromuscular electrical stimulation. A hand-held device produces a carefully calibrated current that is delivered by specially designed electrodes to the patient's throat area. The small electrical currents stimulate motor nerves in the throat, causing the muscles responsible for swallowing to contract. Patients feel a slight tingling or warmth when receiving VitalStim Therapy, but no pain. With repeated therapy, muscles are "re-educated" to function again. When used in conjunction with traditional treatment methods, the quality of a

(more)

New Technology Offers Hope for Dysphagia Patients... p. 2

patient's swallowing function improves.

VitalStim Therapy is the only neuromuscular electrical stimulation treatment approved by the Food and Drug Administration for use in treating dysphagia. Over 98 percent of patients report improvement in their swallowing ability.

Marcia became certified in VitalStim Therapy and now works for the Visiting Nurse Association in the Collin County area. Typical treatment for patients is three times a week. Depending on the severity, treatment can last as little as six sessions.

Marcia has worked with patients recovering from stroke and cancer, and notes significant improvement in the swallowing abilities of patients treated with VitalStim Therapy. "It's made a big difference in their lives, as well as the lives of their families and other care givers," she adds.

Information about VitalStim Therapy by a VNA home care professional can be obtained by calling (214) 689-2224.



Marcia Snyder, a speech language pathologist certified in VitalStim Therapy, has success using the new technology to treat VNA patients with swallowing difficulties.