



HEALTH AWARENESS

When Swallowing Becomes A Challenge

(NAPSA)—What's it like when you can't swallow? The problem is more common than you might think.

Dysphagia, a term encompassing a variety of swallowing disorders, affects an estimated 15 million Americans, with one million new diagnoses every year. In fact, more people die annually from complications associated with swallowing dysfunction than from liver and kidney disease and HIV-AIDS combined.

Who's At Risk

Dysphagia can be found in people of all ages. About 75 percent of stroke patients and 90 percent of people with neurological illnesses such as Parkinson's disease and ALS experience dysphagia at some point. Patients with traumatic brain injury and many who undergo radiation therapy for head and neck cancers can also be at risk. Some children are born with the condition.

New Treatments

Traditional methods to treat dysphagia involve thermal stimulation, swallowing exercises, and diet modifications, including pureed foods and thickened liquids. In severe cases, patients may require a feeding tube because they are unable to take in any kind of nutrition or fluids on their own.

Today, however, more and more people are finding relief from a new treatment that uses electrical impulses to retrain throat muscles. Called VitalStim Therapy, the patented device allows a small current to pass through external electrodes on the neck in order to re-educate the muscles around the throat to restore swallowing.

After a referral by a physician, a therapist certified to use the device administers treatment—usually three to five times per



A new treatment is helping many of the estimated 15 million Americans with swallowing dysfunction.

week, for as much as an hour at a time. The treatments are not painful, but patients may feel a tingling or pulling sensation. Some patients see dramatic improvement after just four or five sessions.

New Results

Speech pathologists report they often accomplish more with the new device than with traditional treatments—and in a much shorter time. Sue Creekmore, a speech pathologist and Director of Clinical Services at HealthSouth Rehab Hospital in Huntsville, Ala., says that in the past, brain-stem stroke patients were typically among the hardest to treat—usually unable to eat anything orally for three to six months post-stroke.

Ms. Creekmore says electrical stimulation treatment has reduced that time to two to three weeks. She adds that when treatment is begun within about five to seven days post-stroke, most patients start consuming a normal diet by the end of eight to 10 treatment sessions. To date, the device is the only electrical stimulation device cleared by the FDA for the treatment of dysphagia.

VitalStim Therapy is available at HealthSouth hospitals nationwide. For more information, call 1-888-REHAB-4-U or visit the Web site at www.healthsouth.com.