Outpatient Dysphagia Management Program

What is Dysphagia?

Dysphagia is a term used to describe a wide range of swallowing issues that involve decreased ability to chew and/or swallow food, liquid or saliva. Dysphagia affects millions of people in the United States each year. Dysphagia can occur in adults of any age following an acquired brain injury due to stroke or trauma, degenerative neurological disease processes or head and neck cancer and its treatment. Dysphagia can also occur in infants and children.

Some warning signs of dysphagia may include frequent coughing/throat clearing during or following meals, changes in vocal quality, decreased interest in eating or unexplained weight loss. However it is frequently difficult to determine, if an individual has dysphagia by observation alone because many individuals may experience “silent aspiration.” Silent aspiration occurs when food and/or liquid pass into the lungs without a normal response (cough or throat clear) to clear the material away. This can lead to life threatening illness if left unidentified and untreated. A flexible endoscopic evaluation of swallowing (FEES) or a modified barium swallow study (MBS) is necessary to accurately diagnose the swallowing disorder.

Dysphagia Management Program at Carolinas Rehabilitation

Once the swallowing issues are clearly identified, Speech-Language Pathologists develop a dysphagia management plan. They provide education regarding normal and disordered swallowing and outline the rehabilitative and compensatory methods that may be used. The approach depends on a number of factors. Treatment may include modification of food and liquid textures, use of postures or techniques to improve swallowing safety or teaching specific exercises to improve swallowing function. Use of instrumentation to improve swallowing functioning is a fairly new and promising area of swallowing rehabilitation.

VitalStim Therapy

VitalStim is the only neuromuscular electrical stimulation device that is cleared by the FDA to be used in dysphagia therapy. At Carolinas Rehabilitation we have several certified VitalStim providers. During VitalStim, a small, carefully calibrated current is delivered by specifically designed electrodes. The current stimulates motor nerves in the throat, and the muscles responsible for swallowing contract. With repeated therapy, the quality of the swallowing function may improve. Patients must participate three to five days per week for the treatment to be effective. The duration typically lasts a few weeks.

Services are available with a physician referral. To refer a patient for our Dysphagia Management Program, call 704-355-4300 or fax 704-355-7873