

Researcher Hopes to Help People With Dysphagia

April 2 2010

(PhysOrg.com) -- Researchers from the UT Dallas Callier Center for Communication Disorders and Baylor Institute for Rehabilitation (BIR) are working together to investigate the effects of drinking water on patients with dysphagia, a disorder that affects a person's ability to swallow.

Their study will document the benefits and problems of the "free water protocol," which lets patients have water and ice instead of restricting them to liquids that have been artificially thickened.

"Currently, some medical practitioners discourage patients with dysphagia from drinking water due to concerns that [aspiration](#) of the water into the lungs may result in pneumonia," said Helen Kenedi, MS, principal investigator of the study and clinical lecturer in the School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences. "Patients who are denied access to water often report that they are thirsty, are dehydrated and have a decreased quality of life."

Based on the patient reports, Kathy Panther, speech-language pathologist and rehabilitation director for the Frazier Rehabilitation Institute in Louisville, Ky., developed a protocol that allows patients access to uncontaminated ice and water before and after meals. In theory, the properties of uncontaminated water will not be harmful to the lungs, so aspirating the water will be a benign event.

Although Panther reported improved quality of life among patients

following the free water protocol, Kenedi's study is the first of its kind to objectively document other potential good and bad effects.

“Given our aging population, dysphagia is likely to become more prevalent as people suffer from strokes, [traumatic brain injury](#) or dementia” said Kenedi. “Documentation of the effects of the free water protocol will contribute to better management of individuals with swallowing disorders.”

Other researchers involved in the study include Dr. Christine Dollaghan, professor in the School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences; Tricia Olea Santos, MS, doctoral student in the School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences; and Jacqueline Daniels, MS, speech-language pathologist from BIR.

The researchers will study patients who receive the free water protocol as part of their routine clinical care at Baylor Institute for Rehabilitation.

“We hope the results of the study will help to clarify the possible benefits of the free water protocol and the kinds of patients with whom it can be implemented,” said Kenedi.

Provided by University of Texas at Dallas

Citation: Researcher Hopes to Help People With Dysphagia (2010, April 2) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-04-people-dysphagia.html>

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