

Surgical device brings hope to those with acid reflux

December 30 2013, by David Breen, Orlando Sentinel

For two years, Milagros Camacho struggled with what she thought was heartburn after every meal. At night stomach acid would sometimes come out of her mouth and nose. Even drinking water would set off her symptoms.

"I was afraid to eat," recalled Camacho, 55. Eventually she was diagnosed with [gastroesophageal reflux disease](#), or GERD. It's a chronic condition that can eventually lead to cancer of the esophagus.

But after undergoing an innovative surgical procedure at Florida Hospital Celebration Health, Camacho is symptom-free and finally able to eat normally.

Camacho had what's known as a LINX device implanted around her esophagus. A ring of titanium magnets similar to a bracelet, it stretches to allow the patient to swallow food and liquid but contracts to keep [stomach acid](#) out of the esophagus.

Camacho, who had the surgery Oct. 30, spent just one night in the hospital and reports she had an easy recovery.

Side effects are minor and rare but can include difficulty swallowing. Occasionally patients will complain that they can feel the device, but Camacho so far has no complaints.

Her procedure was performed by Dr. James "Butch" Rosser, a general

surgeon for whom the issue is personal. As a young medical student working at a Veterans Affairs hospital in Mississippi, he treated his uncle, who was suffering from [esophageal cancer](#). That uncle, Korean War veteran Ludie Mitchell Jr., later died of the disease.

"There needs to be illumination on this issue because it's so needless," Rosser, 59, said. According to the National Cancer Institute, there are slightly fewer than 18,000 new cases of esophageal cancer each year and more than 15,000 deaths.

It's the fastest-growing type of cancer in the U.S., Rosser said, up 600 percent since 1972.

"This problem is increasing as our diet gets more fatty and as our BMI gets higher," he said. And Americans' increasing reliance on pills to treat heartburn, he said, can actually make the problem worse.

"People are self-medicating, or their doctors are putting them on pills," he said. "The symptoms may go away, but the problem is still there."

The LINX procedure has so far been performed on 2,000 people worldwide. Rosser is the only Central Florida surgeon trained to do the procedure.

The band is implanted using four to six small incisions in a surgery much less invasive than earlier techniques. The previous method, known as Nissen fundoplication, involves disconnecting the stomach from the spleen and then manipulating the stomach. It has a much longer recovery time than LINX.

In addition, it makes it very difficult for patients to burp, Rosser said, and physically impossible to vomit.

The main constraint of the LINX procedure is that it forces patients to eat more slowly and chew more carefully, which is healthier anyway.

Camacho hopes other people will heed the warning to get their symptoms checked out.

"Don't let it happen like me," she said, "waiting two years and suffering."

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