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St. Cloud doctor helps others breathe easier

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A local doctor has helped pioneer a new surgical procedure that may help those with chronic sinus problems.

While watching their children play hockey at the National Hockey Center in 2006, Dr. Ted Truitt and a neighbor talked about whether it was possible to use balloons to treat sinusitis.

"It led to discussions and brainstorming for weeks, if not months," said Truitt, an otolaryngologist at St. Cloud Ear, Nose & Throat.

Working with a clinic in San Antonio, Texas, Truitt and his colleagues were able to develop a surgery using balloons that they hoped would eliminate the need for general anesthesia and cut down on patient recovery time.

They formed a company named Entellus and began a study of 50 patients, 20 in the St. Cloud area. The St. Cloud Surgical Center also helped assist in the research and development of the procedure to treat chronic sinusitis.

Traditional surgical treatments, including functional endoscopic sinus surgery or FESS, can work well. However, since bone and tissue are removed from the nose, it requires general anesthesia and a lengthier recovery, anywhere from three to five days.

The new treatment, called FinESS, hopes to eliminate the long recovery and some of the problems encountered with traditional FESS.

"Rather than removing tissue, the procedure simply 'remodels' the sinus outflow to provide better drainage," Truitt said.

He explained the process:

"Since many chronic sinusitis patients have smaller drainage pathways, FinESS uses a balloon to expand this tract, thereby remodeling and improving drainage," he said. "The gum area, beneath the lip and directly above the upper teeth, is numbed. Then a small balloon catheter with a micro endoscope for viewing is inserted into the sinus outflow tract and inflated."

Because it's still a newer procedure, doctors will have to see how the results play out long term. Truitt also cautioned that it's meant for about 30-50 percent of chronic sinusitis patients, not all.

But by getting rid of the general anesthesia, which cuts the cost by 30-50 percent, the clinic hopes the innovation may save the health care system money.

Only about 150 patients have undergone the treatment so far, which received approval by the Food and Drug Administration last April. All of the physicians at St. Cloud Ear, Nose & Throat are trained in the procedure.

Although Sara DeVos was initially a bit hesitant to undergo such a new procedure, the idea that it was minimally invasive was what sold DeVos, who had seven sinus infections last year.

The St. Cloud resident chalked it up to stress, work and planning a wedding, but as the infections grew progressively worse, she eventually had such a bad case of vertigo that it began to affect her work life.

"I didn't feel it the next day," said DeVos of the procedure, which she had performed on her almost a year ago. "And I haven't had a sinus infection since."

It's the results that have been the most rewarding for Truitt to see.

"Comments are mainly how quick they recover and how good they feel," Truitt said. "After one year, people have felt great, and their symptoms have gone away."

Clarence Schuneman of St. Stephen can attest to the results. Schuneman had struggled with sinus problems his whole life. The 77-year-old said the left side of his nose was chronically plugged up and infected.

In late September, he had the procedure performed.

"I didn't feel a thing," he said. "I thought I'd have some pain, but I didn't. It was very, very easy."

Additional Facts

About sinusitis

Sinusitis occurs when the nasal tissues become inflamed, resulting in the sinuses becoming blocked and filled with fluid, often leading to an infection.

Chronic sinusitis (sinusitis that persists for at least three weeks), affects an estimated 32 million people in the United States.

An estimated 20 percent of chronic cases don't respond well to medications, even though millions of dollars are spent annually in the U.S. for medications that promise symptom relief.

Source: WebMD.com

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