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CONTACT: Jaime Wrigley, OSMC · 2310 California Road, Elkhart, IN 46514
574.970.4458

OSMC First in Region to Perform Latest Procedure for Treating Back and Leg Pain

Area resident will be among the first in the country to get the device.

For years a medical technique called spinal cord stimulation has helped patients suffering from chronic back or leg pain find relief. The procedure involves implanting a small device – a neurostimulator – under the skin in the lower back. The device interrupts pain messages by sending out mild electrical impulses that reach the brain faster than the pain signal can arrive. In other words, it outsmarts the pain.

“Spinal cord stimulation has proven to be remarkably effective, and it’s helped many of my patients with chronic pain feel better and get back to their normal activities,” says anesthesiologist and pain management specialist Gene W. Grove, MD, an OSMC physician who has been performing the procedure for the past 19 years. “But until now, the device has not been ‘MRI friendly.’” According to Grove, that’s a meaningful downside, given that an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan has become such a vital tool in diagnosing a wide range of health conditions. “We rely on the MRI for highly detailed images of internal organs, muscle, joints, tumors, and other areas of the body. But until now, patients with a neurostimulator implant were unable to have an MRI scan because of the high level of magnetic and RF (radio frequency) energy generated by the scanner.”

That’s now changed thanks to a technological advancement – recently approved by the FDA – that resolves the conflict between the MRI scanner and the spinal cord stimulator (SCS) system. A patient with this newest system, manufactured by Minneapolis-based Medtronic Inc., can now safely undergo an MRI if needed.

“That’s really important to me,” says Cynthia Thorne, Michiana’s first recipient of the new SCS system. Thorne, who has been dealing with chronic lower back pain for the past three years, practiced as a pediatrician for 15 years, so the combination of her condition along with her medical background puts her in a unique position to appreciate the importance of access to MRI technology. “As part of the insurance-approval process, I had a trial with a temporary neurostimulator a few months ago to ensure that it would work for me. The relief I got was amazing,” she says. “But I was concerned about the fact that the system would prevent an MRI study should the need arise down the road.”

That concern was well founded. Recent studies suggest that 70 percent of patients with neurostimulators will, within three years, encounter a health issue that could call for an MRI. Without this recent enhancement to the technology, such patients would be denied access to an MRI scan.

According to Dr. Grove, there’s yet another key feature of the system that will further enhance Cynthia Thorne’s therapy. “As the patient moves about during her normal daily activity, the level of stimulation she needs changes. This SCS, using motion sensor technology similar to that found in smart phones and computer gaming systems, will recognize these changes in body position and automatically adjust the stimulation level accordingly. Plus, the system records and stores these posture changes – feedback we can use to determine if her stimulation requirements have changed over time.”

“After three years of treatment, all other options for managing my back pain had been exhausted without lasting improvement,” said Thorne. “I was ready to move forward with the earlier version of this stimulator due to the success of the temporary device, but I had concerns for my future health, given that I would not be able to have an MRI scan. I feel very fortunate that Medtronic was able to release the new MRI-compatible system in time for my implantation. My concerns are gone.”

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