

After 18 years, 80-yr-old woman eats again

Madhavi Rajadhyaksha | TNN

Mumbai: For most of us, going without food for a day is unthinkable, but 80-year-old Shantabai Kulkarni has gone without solid food for the past 18 years. Today, her shrivelled frame weighs a mere 20 kilos, and speaks volumes about her suffering. But her eyes slowly light up as she talks about how she just bit into an idli, all thanks to a procedure she underwent on March 23.

Trouble for Shantabai, a mother of five, began when she found it difficult to swallow her food, way back in 1969. Her throat muscles had constricted, in an oesophageal disorder known in medical parlance as cricopharyngeal achalasia. Slowly her sumptuous meals began to shrink to curd-rice and soft foods. More recently, it would take her over an hour to swallow a bowl-full of liquid.

From one doctor to another, she struggled to find ways to swallow a decent meal. "We took her to Tata hospital for almost a year, where doctors would dilate her food pipe. But that didn't help much and we gave up," says her son Suresh.



MEDICAL VICTORY: Shantabai's throat muscles had constricted making it difficult for her to swallow

Bit by bit, an otherwise fun-loving Shantabai began to become listless. "It was boring. Same fruit juices, same kanji," she murmurs from her bed in a Vile Parle nursing home.

But Shantabai found help at last, when her sons read about a similar patient getting help, in a newspaper a few months ago. "Her muscles had become stiff. We were worried as her physical stature was that of an 18-year-old, but her physiology was that of an octogenarian," said gastroen-

terologist Jayant Barve who performed a 10-minute procedure on Shantabai at his Vile Parle clinic. While cases of oesophageal disorders are seen at clinics, rarely does an 80-year-old come forth for a procedure.

Simply put, the doctors inserted a video endoscope and dilated Shantabai's foodpipe with a balloon. She was given liquids the next day, and bit by bit has been tasting food. "It involves a psychological shift. It's like re-learning how to eat," says Dr Barve, who heads the medicine department of civic-run Cooper Hospital.

City experts say Shantabai makes for a high-risk patient, but they do receive a steady stream of patients with oesophageal problems. "While 80% of these patients recover with a dilation done with the help of an endoscope, 20% may require further conventional surgery," said professor and head of gastro-intestinal surgery at civic-run KEM Hospital Avinash Supe. "People shouldn't wait for so many years without food, but should seek intervention at the earliest," he added.

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