

Doc 'opens up' option for foodpipe cancer patients

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Mumbai: Usha Dalvi doesn't make a pretty picture. The twin tragedies of poverty and cancer have left her frame emaciated. But the mother of three who hails from a small village in Sawantwadi now has a reason to smile: she can eat a normal meal the normal way with her hands and mouth after a gap of over two years.

Usha, who was diagnosed with cancer of the foodpipe in early 2004, remembers having her last normal meal on May 23, 2004. "Thereafter, I have existed on milk whenever I could afford it or a paste of biscuits and water," says the 45-year-old widow, who feeds for her family by bartering her kokam fruits with the local baniya.

The most painful part of her existence in the last two years has been the manner of feeding herself: pouring the liquid down her stomach with the plastic pipe attached to her nose.



Dr Barve detected and operated upon Usha Dalvi's cancer

Things looked up only when her relatives in Mumbai heard about Dr Jayant Barve, who heads the medicine department at the elite-run Cooper Hospital, (but is better known as superstar Amitabh Bachchan's doctor), from a friend. Her brother-in-law, Jai Ram Dalvi, a former mill-hand living in Dadar, and others hailing from Dandell village

of Sawantwadi taluka pooled in their resources for Usha's medical help.

Attaching the nasal pipe is a standard—but temporary—practice for persons with foodpipe or oesophagus cancer. The tube is changed every 15 days. However, in Usha's case, her poverty and illiteracy prevented her from going to the doctor every fortnight for change.

A COMMON BUT DANGEROUS DISEASE

Oesophagus is better known as the foodpipe, running from the base of the throat to the stomach. The foodpipe cancer is the commonest of all gastro-intestinal cancers, but it has high fatalities. "This is because by the time patients come for help it's too late. This cancer is characterised by difficulty in swallowing and at times by reflux (digested food coming back into the pipe)," says Dr Jayant Barve. Gastroenterologist Dr Aabha Nagral from Jaslok Hospital explains, "Patients begin with difficulty swallowing solids, but progress to having difficulty swallowing their own saliva." The pipe which is 3 cm in diameter shrinks to barely 3 mm as the disease progresses. This cancer is worrisome also because of its high mortality rates—70% patients are beyond help and only 10% have a chance of living beyond two years. Usha Dalvi is, obviously, lucky in this aspect. The idea, say both Barve and Nagral, is to not ignore any difficulty in swallowing and heartburns at a later age. THE

Moreover, her local doctor told her that the tube would remain for the rest of her life and she would never be able to eat normally. The good news that there was no longer any evidence of cancer in her body was thus lost in her miserable existence.

"It's tragic that someone had to live with the same pipe for over 18 months," says Dr Barve, who removed

the pipe last fortnight after Usha's relatives in Dadar brought her to his Vile Parle hospital.

The pipe had lost all its plasticity and had taken on the shape of her stomach. "But as the procedure was done using endoscopy or non-invasive techniques on March 16, she was not in much discomfort," says Dr Barve. In fact, the pipe's

presence had resulted in lot of pain and ulcers in her nose and throat.

The pipe was removed and the area of the foodpipe, which had narrowed, was dilated with balloons and special dilators with the help of an endoscope (an instrument that is introduced through the mouth). Although Usha narrowed foodpipe may need repeated dilations, she says she won't be able to afford further operations. "Hence, I have taught her to 'swallow' a plastic dilator (tube), just like the Indian sword trick," says Dr Barve.

Usha's cancer was detected and operated upon in April 2004 at civic KEM Hospital, Parel. "I was sent to Tata Memorial Hospital on September 2, 2004, when they fitted me the last tube," she recalls, flashing a tiffin box with 'March 26, 2006' engraved on it. "That is the day I started eating again," she says, waiting to return to her children in a couple of days.