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Biofeedback & Bowel Disorders: Teaching Yourself to Live without the Problem

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What is biofeedback?

Biofeedback is a neuromuscular reeducation tool we can use to tell if certain processes in our bodies are working correctly. It is a painless process that uses a computer and a video monitor to display bodily functions that we usually are not aware of. Special sensors measure these functions, which are displayed as sounds we can hear, or as linegraphs we can see on a computer screen. In this way, we receive more information on how our bodies work.

A therapist helps us use this displayed information to modify or change abnormal responses to more normal patterns. That may mean increasing a response, decreasing a response, or learning to coordinate two responses more effectively.

How can biofeedback help?

Bowel control is a bodily function that can be shaped by biofeedback. Bowel control is something most of us master in our early childhood years. Once control is established we think very little about these processes. That is, until something goes wrong.

Disease, trauma, or age-related changes in the body may interrupt our ability to command this crucial body function. Biofeedback techniques help us reestablish these learned patterns. The technology allows us to retrain defective processes, and to restore more normal function.

Does biofeedback work for everyone?

Biofeedback and home strengthening exercises are a nonsurgical, non-invasive therapy option that has been shown to reduce symptoms in a large percentage of people. However, the benefits of biofeedback will vary from person to person.

Participating in this therapy can help restore a sense of personal control which may have been lost as a result of dealing with a functional bowel disorder.

What disorders may be treated by biofeedback?

Biofeedback therapy may be used to treat a variety of bowel disorders including incontinence, constipation, painful spasms of the pelvic floor muscles and symptoms associated with the irritable bowel syndrome.

When should biofeedback therapy be used?

It is important to consult a qualified physician when considering treatment options. One or more of a variety of diagnostic tests may be suggested.

Before treatment for incontinence is implemented, a thorough assessment of the muscles and nerves in the pelvic floor should be carried out.

In order to implement a neuromuscular reeducation program that best fits your needs, detailed information relating to your symptoms needs to be given to your physician and therapist. Once an evaluation has been made the correct treatment option can be implemented.

Who administers biofeedback therapy?

Biofeedback may be administered by a well trained and qualified physician, nurse, or physical or occupational therapist.

How long does biofeedback therapy last?

Therapy sessions may vary. A person with a non-neurological problem may be seen an average of six to eight treatment sessions over a three month period. Treatment sessions may be scheduled weekly and decrease in frequency as improvements occur.

Home practice is the key to improvement. It is important to take what is learned in therapy sessions and apply these same exercises and strategies at home. Repetition of the correct patterns and application of these patterns to everyday situations is critical to reestablishing bowel control.

This specific treatment is based on extensive research done at the National Institutes of Health. Research shows that an average symptom reduction of 75% to 80% is possible with this type of therapy. Biofeedback offers an important treatment alternative for people affected by bowel disorders.

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