

‘Magic’ magnet straightens spine to change lives

Jonah Kissell showed up Friday at surgeon Jason Robison’s office for his regular visit. With his mother and father in tow, the 7-year-old boy walked confidently into a room where a computer showed before-and-after X-rays of his spine.

Jonah was now ready for his magnet.

The Caldwell boy was born with Noonan syndrome, which caused a severe spine deformity.

Five years ago, his best treatment option was to have surgery implanting metal rods along his spine. That would be followed by surgeries every six months to slowly adjust his spine as he grew. And each surgery would carry risks.

“If you’re doing this for three, four, five, six years... your risk of having a complication approaches 100 percent,” Dr. Robison said.

But last spring, Robison, a St. Luke’s pediatric orthopedic surgeon, started using a magnetic treatment on Jonah called the “MAGEC” system, made by manufacturer NuVasive.

At the time, Jonah’s spine was bent at about a 70-degree angle.

The medical device requires one surgery to install metal rods along the spine — rods that include key magnetic pieces.

Now, instead of going under anesthesia and having his back cut open every six months, Jonah, mother Mandy and father Tony drive to an outpatient medical office in Meridian every three months. Jonah has a 20-minute visit, getting X-rays and sitting still for less than a minute while Robinson uses a giant magnet to adjust the metal rods and align the spine.

“He straightened right up during surgery,” said Mandy Kissell.

The spinal scoliosis had put pressure on the boy’s lungs. He coughed a lot and had trouble breathing.

Tony Kissell said Jonah has more energy and is more active, stands taller, and runs and walks better.

The device is not cheap. It’s more expensive than inserting metal rods alone — a representative of the medical device manufacturer declined to say how much it costs, but reports have estimated it at two to three times the cost of traditional rods. And it took some doing to get Idaho Medicaid to agree to pay for the new procedure, Robison said.

But in the long run, it’s significantly cheaper than undergoing dozens of surgeries, Robison and researchers have said. For example, Jonah has a separate medical condition that requires days of hospitalization before and after surgery — something they avoid with the magnet.

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Avoiding just one surgery saved enough money to make the more expensive magnetic rods a better deal than what St. Luke's was using before, Robison said.

"Being able to do something for these really complicated patients is satisfying," Robison said. "You see it in their faces, in their smiles and in their parents, who are so relieved."

For Jonah, it is a world of difference.

Jonah laughed during his magnetic spine procedure Friday. For a few moments, he whined. But when it was over, he was all smiles and laughs and — instead of spending five days in the hospital — was ready for his treat of lunch at McDonald's.

"He can just be a more typical little boy now, and play with his brother and sister."

— Mandy Kissell

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