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Boy, five, who had never eaten amazes parents by tasting food for the first time after pioneering treatment

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The parents of a five-year-old boy who had never eaten have revealed their delight after he tucked into a plate full of food for the first time after receiving specialist treatment in Austria.

Little Leo Coning was refusing to be breastfed after he was born - so when he was just five days old his concerned mum and dad took him to hospital.

He was also diagnosed with an unrelated hole in his heart, but doctors were left baffled by his inability to eat - so he was fed through tubes into his nose and stomach for five years.

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Amazing: Leo Coning, five, had to be fed through a tube until Austrian specialists cured him

His frustrated mother Mel and father Nick desperately looked for a cure but were told that his mystery condition could not be treated in this country.

But a TV programme last August about a young girl with a similar problem who was cured after special treatment in Austria was the family's saving grace.

His parents set about raising the huge £10,000 required for the trip, seeing it as a last-ditch attempt to get Leo eating normally.

Mrs Coning, a 35-year-old teacher, said: "We just didn't know what to do. Leo kept being diagnosed with all these problems but no-one could find a link to his eating problems. Instead he was still feeding through a tube.

"For a year-and-a-half after he had the feeding tube fitted he was being sick six times a day.

"We just wanted him to be able to eat but everybody told us that the specialist treatment was unavailable over here."

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Proud: Parents Mel and Nick Coning were stunned when Leo tucked into a plate of food

Thanks to generous locals in their hometown of Norton, North Yorks, and Leo's brother Ashley, eight, who completed a mini-triathlon, a staggering 24,000 pounds was raised.

During the surgery, brave Leo had to undergo gruelling controlled starvation and physiotherapy.

But Mr Coning, a 39-year-old police officer, slammed the NHS's inability to cure his youngest son.

He said: "The only reason we had to go to Austria is because the NHS would not spend money and set up a specialist unit here. It made us so angry and frustrated.

"We arrived in Austria last month and basically had to put Leo's life in the specialists' hands. They took the button at the end of his feeding tube out.

"This meant he had to eat food orally and begin to associate the pain in his stomach as hunger and that the only way to make it go away was to eat some food orally."

Leo had therapy to teach him how to chew, and was also taught how to use a knife and fork to eat.

The brave boy has been dogged by numerous medical problems in his short life.

At two months he had heart surgery to correct the hole in his heart and around his first birthday he had a tube fitted permanently for him to feed through.

At three he was diagnosed with serious swelling of the spine which specialists thought could be preventing messages getting from Leo's brain to his stomach to tell him to eat.

He was also found to have a hole in his skull during a routine scan - but this was not operated on due to the cost.

The plucky youngster bravely battled through and was even gratefully munching on chocolate cake just a week after the therapy - and he is now able to tuck into his favourite ice creams and salami.

And Mr Leo revealed that hungry Leo even took advantage of the local delicacies while he was abroad - scoffing a huge Frankfurter sausage just a week after his surgery.

"It's just unreal to see him eat and the pleasure he gets from food now. He loves ice cream and salami, and he really enjoyed the food in Austria.

"We are so relieved that Leo is eating normally and all the specialists we have worked with in England are delighted about his progress.

"We can now sit down and eat as a family."

Leo's consultant Dr Robert Smith said: "Unfortunately the specific treatment Leo needed to help him eat is currently unavailable in the UK at the moment so I fully supported his family's decision to go to Austria.

"I was happy for him to go and very pleased that it has proved to be such a success."

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