Tonight we look at devices designed to control back pain instead of having to take opioid drugs that can be addictive.

The devices are called spinal-cord stimulators and about 65,000 Americans have them implanted every year. But are they safe? And have they been sufficiently tested? Here’s NBC’s Stephanie Gosk.

A career as a Hollywood stuntman left Pete Hornby with debilitating chronic pain.

Pete: “I had to keep a flask of Jack Daniels and a packet of oxy to keep me going”

But today, Hornby can tend to his horses, thanks to a surgical device called a spinal cord stimulator.

Pete: “It saved my life. Literally saved my life.”

The device is surgically implanted under the skin and sends a mild electrical current to the spinal cord to relieve chronic pain. Spinal cord stimulators are being touted by the medical device industry as a safe, non-opioid option for certain patients.

Jim Taft: “They just kept pushing it. You know what I mean?”

Jim Taft had high hopes when he met representatives from a company that manufactures the device at a doctor’s visit.

Jim: “You’re gonna see a dramatic decrease in your pain medicine. And I was like, ‘that’s great’”

But it didn’t work out that way, he says.

Jim: “It was the sensation of being electrocuted. It was very painful.”

And, he says, it left him worse off than before.

Jim: “I walked with a cane before this. I was able to go do things, but now I’m stuck in the bed”

An NBC News investigation in partnership with the Associated Press found more than 80,000 spinal cord stimulator injury reports filed with the FDA over the last decade. The third highest of any medical device category on the market.

The reports include device malfunctions, shocks, infections, and in rare cases, paralysis. Advocates say the approval process for devices should be much more rigorous.

Diana Zuckerman (Nat’l Center for Health Research President): “I think most Americans assume, if FDA approves it, it’s proven to work...” But that’s not always the case?...”It is not always the case and too often with medical devices we don’t know whether it works or not.”

The FDA says injury reports are not a reliable source of data. And conclusions about a device’s safety or role in an adverse event cannot be drawn from MDRs alone. And that spinal cord stimulators go through the most rigorous device approval process.

In terms of human testing, FDA approval for Jim Taft’s device was based on one new clinical study, in which 26 patients had the device implanted. It also included a review of existing studies involving nearly 1,000 patients with similar devices.

Dr. Gary Brenner: “There isn’t much good information in the medical device space to tell us which cases in particular the device is likely to be helpful in.”

Boston Scientific manufactured Taft’s device and told NBC News that the technology has been used for over 40 years and has helped hundreds of thousands of people. According to its internal quality assessments, over 95% of the injury reports were temporary or reversable.

But that is cold comfort for Jim Taft.

Jim: “Had I known what I know now, I wouldn’t have had it put in.”

Stephanie Gosk, NBC News, Washington