

What is Bells's Palsy?

Bell's palsy is the most common cause of facial paralysis. It usually affects just one side of the face. Symptoms appear suddenly and are at their worst about 48 hours after they start. They can range from mild to severe and include

- Twitching
- Weakness
- Paralysis
- Drooping eyelid or corner of mouth
- Drooling
- Dry eye or mouth
- Excessive tearing in the eye
- Impaired ability to taste

Scientists think that a viral infection makes the facial nerve swell or become inflamed. You are most likely to get Bell's palsy if you are pregnant, diabetic or sick with a cold or flu.

Three out of four patients improve without treatment. With or without treatment, most people begin to get better within 2 weeks and recover completely within 3 to 6 months.

Definition

Bell's palsy is a disorder of the nerve that controls movement of the muscles in the face. This nerve is called the facial or 7th cranial nerve.

Damage to this nerve causes weakness or paralysis of these muscles. Paralysis means that you cannot use the muscles at all.

Causes

Bell's palsy affects about 30,000 - 40,000 people a year in the United States.

Bell's palsy involves damage to the seventh cranial (facial) nerve. This nerve controls the movement of the muscles of the face.

Bell's palsy is thought to be due to swelling (inflammation) of this nerve in the area where it travels through the bones of the skull.

The cause is often not clear. A type of herpes infection called herpes zoster might be involved. Other conditions that may cause Bell's palsy include:

- HIV infection
- Lyme disease
- Middle ear infection

- Sarcoidosis

Symptoms

Sometimes you may have a cold shortly before the symptoms of Bell's palsy begin.

Symptoms most often start suddenly, but may take 2 - 3 days to show up. They do not become more severe after that.

Symptoms are almost always on one side of the face only. They may range from mild to severe.

The face will feel stiff or pulled to one side, and may look different. Other symptoms can include:

- Difficulty closing one eye
- Difficulty eating and drinking; food falls out of one side of the mouth
- Drooling due to lack of control over the muscles of the face
- Drooping of the face, such as the eyelid or corner of the mouth
- Problems smiling, grimacing, or making facial expressions
- Twitching or weakness of the muscles in the face

Other symptoms that may occur:

- Dry eye, which may lead to eye sores or infections
- Dry mouth
- Headache
- Loss of sense of taste
- Sound that is louder in one ear (hyperacusis)
- Twitching in face

Exams and Tests

Often, Bell's palsy can be diagnosed just by taking a health history and doing a complete physical exam.

If your health care provider is worried that a brain tumor is causing your symptoms, you may need:

- CT scan of the head
- Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the head

Sometimes, you will need a test to check the nerves that supply the muscles of your face:

- Electromyography (EMG)
- Nerve conduction test

Treatment

Often, no treatment is needed. Symptoms often begin to improve right away. However, it may take weeks or even months for the muscles to get stronger, and this may be frustrating.

Your health care provider may give you lubricating eye drops or eye ointments to keep the surface of the eye moist if you cannot close it completely. You may need to wear an eye patch while you sleep.

Sometimes medicines may be used, but it is not clear how much they help. If medicines are used, they should be started right away.

- Corticosteroids may reduce swelling around the facial nerve
- Medications can fight the virus that may be causing Bell's palsy

Surgery to relieve pressure on the nerve (decompression surgery) has not been shown to benefit most people with Bell's palsy.

Outlook (Prognosis)

Most cases go away completely within a few weeks to months.

If you did not lose all of your nerve function and symptoms began to improve within 3 weeks, you're more likely to regain all or most of the strength in your facial muscles.

Sometimes, the following symptoms still may be present:

- Long-term changes in taste
- Spasms of muscles or eyelids
- Weakness that remains in facial muscles

Possible Complications

Excess drying of the eye surface, leading to eye sores or infections.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call your health care provider right away if your face droops or you have other symptoms of Bell's palsy. Your health care provider can rule out other, more serious conditions, such as stroke.

Prevention

There is no known way to prevent Bell's palsy.