

Treating facial weakness affecting your eye caused by Bell's palsy

Ophthalmology Department

Information for Patients

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What is Bell's palsy?

Bell's palsy is a condition that affects the facial nerve. It causes the muscles on one side of your face to weaken. It can develop within hours to days. It can cause you to have any of the following issues:

- drooping or sagging on one side of your mouth.
- unable to smile on one side.
- drooling and difficulty chewing food.
- unable to whistle.
- loss of taste.
- unable to blink/ close eye properly.
- facial pain.
- unable to wrinkle your forehead.
- sounds may appear louder on the affected side (hyperacusis).
- difficulty with speech.

It is a common condition. About 1 in 60 people will get this at some stage in life. In most people the symptoms go away with no long-term problems.

The symptoms of Bell's palsy can be similar to those of someone having a stroke. You should get urgent medical advice to rule this out. Unlike Bell's palsy, symptoms of stroke often come on suddenly.

**Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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What causes Bell's palsy?

An exact cause of this condition in most people is not clear. Bell's palsy is more likely to happen in people who are pregnant or have diabetes.

In a few people it may be because of a viral infection that causes chickenpox (herpes zoster). This virus stays quiet in the body after you have had chickenpox. The virus may start again as shingles and spread to affect the facial nerve causing facial weakness. This is called Ramsay Hunt syndrome. Symptoms can also include severe ear pain and a rash in and around the ear. You cannot catch Ramsay Hunt syndrome from someone with chickenpox. You can catch chickenpox from someone with shingles (on any part of the body) if you have not had chickenpox before.

Will I need to have any tests?

Other than Bell's palsy, there can be other reasons why your facial nerve does not work properly. Your healthcare practitioner will take a careful history and examination. Often no further tests are needed.

In some cases, your healthcare practitioner may recommend tests to rule out other causes. This may include blood tests and MRI scans (magnetic resonance imaging).

Facial nerve damage can sometimes be related to ear problems. We may refer you to an ear, nose and throat specialist for more assessment.

How is it treated?

The chance of full recovery is improved with treatment to 17 out of 20 patients. There is evidence that a short course of steroid tablets (prednisolone) prescribed within 72 hours (3 days) of the start of symptoms can increase the chance of full recovery. Starting steroids after this time is not found to have the same benefit. Serious side effects from taking steroid tablets are unlikely with a short course.

Your healthcare practitioner may recommend antiviral medication if they suspect Ramsay Hunt Syndrome.

You should notice mild improvement in the first 3 weeks. Then full recovery within 2 to 3 months. In some older people recovery can take up to 12 months.

In some cases, despite treatment, symptoms may not fully recover and the facial muscle weakness can be permanent.

How does Bell's palsy affect the eyes?

Bell's palsy can affect your ability to blink normally. It can stop you from closing your eyelid on the affected side of your face.

We rely on blinking to make sure that the front surface of the eye (cornea) has enough moisture for comfort, better quality vision and protection against infection. It also has a role in the normal drainage of tears.

Difficulty in closing the eyelid can cause irritation and discomfort in your eye. It can cause watery eyes, blurred vision and possible repeated infections. If you cannot close your eye when you are asleep, your eye may be very painful when you wake up.

Sometimes your eyebrow and lower eyelid appear lower compared to the other side.

Rarely, there can be abnormal nerve connections formed during the recovery of the facial nerve. This can cause you to have a variety of symptoms like spasms of the facial muscles on that side, or watering of the affected eye while eating or drinking (gustatory watering).

How can my eye be treated?

Lubrication: We recommend lubricant eye drops and gels during the day as often as you need and an ointment at night before bedtime. This will keep your eye more comfortable and reduce the risk of infection. If the eye is not closing at all, you should use the ointment during the day.

Taping your eyelid shut at night: This will stop the surface of your eye from drying out or getting scratched while you are sleeping. It will also make your eye feel a lot more comfortable in the morning. There is a recommended way to tape your eyelid closed and your healthcare practitioner may demonstrate this to you in clinic:

We recommend 1cm wide Transpore® tape which your pharmacist can order for you. You may have to cut it to size with scissors:

Step 1: Cut 2 strips of tape 6cm long and 1cm wide.

Step 2: Place 1 strip on your lower eyelid. When it gets to the outer corner of your eye direct the strip upwards.

Step 3: Place 1 strip on the upper eyelid. When it gets to the outer corner of the eye direct the strip downwards. The 2 strips should overlap.



Will I need more treatment?

For some people, more steps may be needed if there are no signs of improvement. If you have persistent troublesome symptoms, you may need surgery to help with eye closure and to correct drooping of the eyebrow or lower eyelid.

Some people may also benefit from long term botulinum toxin (Botox) injections. Please search leaflet number 1008 on <https://yourhealth.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk/> for treating hemifacial spasm with Botox injections.

More information

Facial Palsy UK <https://www.facialpalsy.org.uk> has videos of exercises on their website which may help with your recovery.

How to contact us

- Oculoplastic Team: **0116 204 7971** (Monday to Friday, 8am to 5pm)
- Eye Casualty Department (for advice): **0116 258 6273**
Monday to Friday: 8.30am to 4.30pm
Saturday, Sunday and bank holidays: 8.30am to 12.30pm

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