

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 effects the facial nerve which causes the muscles on one side of your face to weaken. It can develop within hours to days and 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 and about 1 in 60 people will develop 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 seek urgent medical advice to rule this out. Unlike Bell's palsy, symptoms of stroke usually come on suddenly.

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or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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What causes Bell's palsy?

An exact cause for this condition in most people is not clear. Bell's palsy is more likely to occur in people who are pregnant, have diabetes and are stressed.

In a few people it may be due to the viral infection that causes chickenpox (herpes zoster) which has lain dormant in the body from a previous episode of chickenpox. The virus may start again as shingles and spread to affect the facial nerve, causing facial weakness. This is called Ramsay Hunt syndrome and 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, but 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. Usually no further tests are needed.

In some cases, your healthcare practitioner may recommend further relevant tests to rule out other causes. This may include blood tests, or a type of scan called an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging).

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

How is it treated?

The chance of full recovery is improved with treatment and occurs in 17 out of 20 patients. There is evidence that a short course of steroid tablets (prednisolone) prescribed within 72 hours 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 as well if Ramsay Hunt Syndrome is suspected.

Usually you should notice mild improvement in the first 3 weeks and then full recovery within 2 to 3 months. In some older people full 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 effect your ability to blink normally and can even prevent you from closing your eyelid, on the affected side of your face.

We rely on blinking to ensure 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, watery eyes, blurred vision and possible repeated infections. If you are unable to close your eye when you are asleep, this may cause your eye to be very painful when you wake up.

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

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

How can my eye be treated?

Lubrication: Usually lubricant eye drops and gels will be recommended for 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, ointment should be used during the day as well.

Taping your eyelid shut at night: This will prevent 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 and when it gets to the outer corner of your eye direct the strip upwards.
- Step 3:** Place 1 strip on the upper eyelid and when it gets to the outer corner of the eye direct the strip downwards. The 2 strips should overlap.



Will I need further treatment?

For some people, further 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 see leaflet number 1008 for treating hemifacial spasm with Botox injections.

Further 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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