

What is Bell's palsy

Bell's palsy is a condition that causes a sudden weakness or paralysis in the muscles of the face. It usually affects only one side of the face and can result in a lop-sided appearance or droopy expression.

Bell's palsy is most common in people aged 15 to 45, although it can affect children and the elderly.

Most people will fully recover, although this can sometimes take many months. About one in every ten people is left with some degree of permanent muscle weakness in their face.

The condition is caused by pressure on the facial nerve, but exactly why this happens is not known.

The condition is named after the doctor who first described it, Sir Charles Bell. Palsy is a word that means a nerve is not working.

What causes Bell's palsy

Bell's palsy is caused by a swelling of the nerve that supplies the face (the facial nerve). This nerve passes from the brain to the face through a tiny hole in the skull, and when swelling occurs in this area, the resulting pressure stops the nerve working properly.

It is not known exactly why the facial nerve swells, although researchers believe it may be triggered by a virus or infection.

What are the symptoms?

- Bell's palsy usually comes on suddenly.
- People cannot control movement of their facial muscles.
- The mouth droops and there is a lopsided smile.
- Paralysis or weakness usually affects only one side of the face.
- The face can feel 'heavy'.
- People can have trouble smiling, raising their eyebrows or chewing food.
- One eye may not close properly and can feel irritated or dry.
- Food may taste different.
- There may be pain around the ear.
- People are otherwise well.

Treatment

In many cases no treatment is necessary. Bell's palsy usually resolves by itself with time, although in some cases this can take many months.

If treatment is necessary, it is usually to relieve the symptoms.

This can include steroids (prednisolone) to reduce the inflammation around the nerve. Steroids are only effective when given shortly after symptoms appear.

If the eye cannot close properly, it is important to use lubricating eye drops. These should be used several times a day to ensure the eye stays moist and is not damaged. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist for more details.

A patch may be necessary to protect the eye, and the eyes may need to be taped shut at night.

Your doctor may provide other treatment. Please discuss this with them.

Home care

If the eye cannot close properly, it is important to use lubricating eye drops. These should be used several times a day to ensure the eye stays moist and is not damaged. A patch may be necessary to protect the eye, especially at night.

What to expect

About nine out of ten people fully recover from Bell's palsy. In severe cases it can take up to a year before the symptoms disappear. In about one in ten cases, people have some permanent weakness or paralysis in their facial muscles.

For most people, the first signs of recovery come within three weeks. Almost all children recover completely.

Notes:

Seeking help



In a **medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).



For other medical problems see your local doctor or health care professional.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call 1300 60 60 24.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



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