

WHAT IS BELL'S PALSY?

Bell's palsy is a temporary condition that causes certain muscles in your face to weaken or become paralyzed. With Bell's palsy, it appears as if half of your face is droopy and you can only smile with one side of your mouth. Usually, you cannot close the eye on that side of your face, and the lower eyelid may also turn outward (called ectropion). This condition can lead to excessive dry eye and tearing in the affected eye.

Bell's palsy occurs when the nerve that controls facial muscles on one side of your face (the 7th cranial nerve) swells or becomes inflamed. It can affect anyone, but mostly occurs in people between the ages of 15 and 60 years old.

Most people who have Bell's palsy find their symptoms improve within a few weeks and they recover completely in three to six months. Approximately 10 percent of people who have Bell's palsy once will get it again, either on the same side or the other side of the face.

This condition rarely affects both sides of the face, however, it can happen. If this bilateral form of Bell's palsy occurs, or if any other part of the body becomes paralyzed, weak or numb, it is important for your doctor to rule out other causes.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of Bell's palsy usually appear suddenly. This condition usually won't affect both sides of the face. If it does, it is called a bilateral form of Bell's palsy.

Symptoms of Bell's palsy may include:

- Numbness, mild weakness or complete paralysis on one side of the face;
- A droopy face on one side, with difficulty making facial expressions, smiling on that side or closing the eye on that side of the face;
- Drooling;
- Pain in or behind your ear or around the jaw on the affected side;
- Increased sensitivity to sound;
- Excessive tearing in the eye or dry eye;
- Headache or neck pain;
- Loss of the ability to taste.

CAUSES

The most common cause of Bell's palsy is thought to be the herpes simplex virus, which also causes cold sores. Potential other causes of Bell's palsy include the herpes zoster virus (which causes chickenpox and shingles), the virus that causes mononucleosis (called Epstein-Barr), and the cytomegalovirus. When one of these viruses infects the body, it can cause the nerve that controls your facial muscles to become inflamed (swollen).

DIAGNOSIS

Bell's palsy is more prevalent among the following people:

- Pregnant women, especially during the third trimester, or who are in the first week after giving birth;
- People who have diabetes:
- Someone who has an upper respiratory infection (cold or flu).

There is no specific lab test that is used to confirm Bell's palsy. Instead, your doctor will diagnose this condition by ruling out other causes of facial paralysis, including stroke or other neurological conditions. He or she will examine your face and study your inability to move upper and/or lower muscles on the affected side of the face.

To help identify other health problems that may be causing the symptoms of Bell's palsy, such as infections or diabetes, sometimes blood tests will be ordered. In diagnosing Bell's palsy, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or computed tomography (CT) scans of the face can help your doctor find out if there are other sources of pressure on the facial nerve. Another test called electromyography (EMG) can show if there has been damage to the facial nerves and, if so, how severe the damage is.

TREATMENT

Every person with Bell's palsy is affected differently. Some people find their symptoms are mild and disappear on their own in about 2 weeks without treatment. Other people may need to be treated with a medication or another option, for instance, if they have an infection.

Some doctors may recommend early treatment with corticosteroids to reduce facial swelling and inflammation. Sometimes an antiviral drug (such as acyclovir) may be helpful in speeding up recovery from Bell's palsy. A combination of both types of drugs may even be used.

Pain may be treated with over-the-counter pain relievers such as aspirin, acetaminophen (like Tylenol) and ibuprofen (such as Advil or Motrin). Sometimes applying moist heat to the affected side of the face can help relieve pain as well.

People with Bell's palsy need to take special care of their affected eye to prevent discomfort and complications from severe dry eye and possibly a scratched cornea (clear covering of the eye). The most common treatment usually includes using lubricating eye drops or artificial tears during the day, and an ointment at night, to keep the eye moist. On occasion, the eye will be patched, taped shut or have a moisture chamber placed over it at night to protect and keep it moist during sleep.

If the eyelid droops so severely that it is turned outward (ectropion), surgery may be needed to repair it.

To help affected facial nerves recover, physical therapy may be recommended, as well as facial massage and exercises.