

Bell's palsy

What is Bell's palsy?

Bell's palsy is a condition where the muscles on one side of the face become paralysed because of a problem in the nerve that controls those muscles. This nerve, one of 12 cranial nerves that come from the brain, is called the seventh nerve or facial nerve. The syndrome was described by Sir Charles Bell, a Scottish surgeon, early in the 19th century.

What causes Bell's palsy?

We are not certain what causes the problem but it appears to be a result of inflammation of the facial nerve due to a viral infection or to an immune reaction. The nerve leaves the brain through a canal in the skull and exits through a small opening in the base of the skull near the ear. The nerve becomes swollen and because of the tight fit in this canal it does not function normally.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom, which occurs suddenly (maybe overnight), is weakness on one side of the face. The corner of the mouth droops, the eye cannot close properly and everyday actions of the face such as smiling and frowning are not possible and look out of shape.

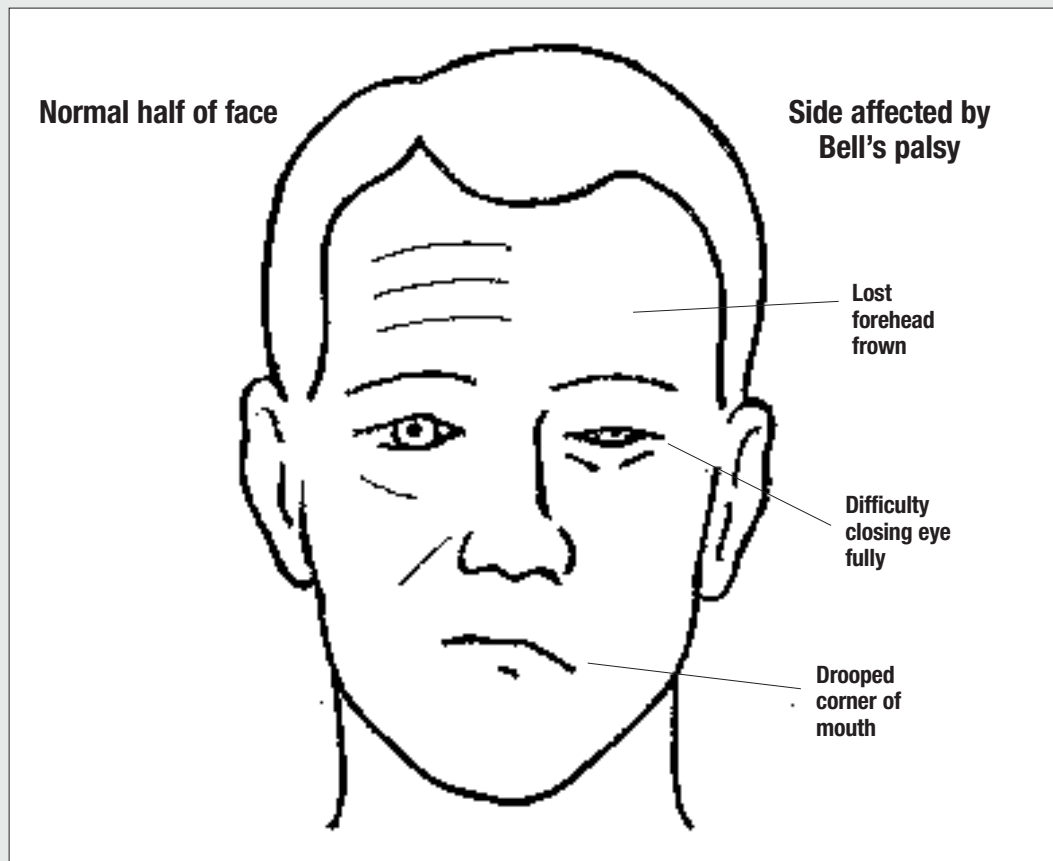
Other possible symptoms include:

- Ear pain just before the problem develops.
- Drooling of saliva.
- Impaired blinking.
- Impaired frowning.
- Difficulty eating.
- Sounds are louder.
- Loss of taste on part of the tongue.

The case can vary from being quite mild and unnoticeable to being quite obvious.

How common is Bell's palsy?

Each year about one person in 2000 gets Bell's palsy. It can occur at any age and although it tends to increase with age it is common in young adults. It



appears to be associated in some instances with diabetes and high blood pressure. It was common in the past in horsemen and coachmen who were exposed to cold winds on their face for long periods.

What is the outcome?

Although causing concern in the person Bell's palsy is usually not a serious or permanent problem. Recovery usually begins within three weeks. At least 75% of patients achieve a good recovery and more than 90% recover completely if the problem is mild. The average time for a full recovery is six weeks but some people experience a slow and steady recovery. For those experiencing poor recovery further investigation is usually necessary. There is no good evidence that operations help recovery.

What is the treatment?

The palsy usually recovers without special treatment but it is worthwhile seeing your

doctor as soon as possible because some cases, due to herpes virus, benefit from anti-viral medication.

Oral steroid treatment

The use of "cortisone" treatment for Bell's palsy is controversial but there is some evidence that starting this treatment within the first three days of onset of the palsy may help.

Care of the eye

If your eye cannot close fully, it is important to protect it from injury such as dust and grit during windy conditions by wearing goggles or a patch. An adhesive patch or tape over the eye will protect it during sleep. The eye should not be allowed to dry and artificial tears are usually prescribed for dryness and at bedtime. Antibacterial eye ointment may be used if the blinking reflex is absent. Report any unusual pain in your eye immediately.

Massage and exercises

Although not fully proven, massaging and exercising the facial muscles may help recovery. Using oil or cream, massage the muscles of the forehead, cheek, eyes and lips. Exercise these muscles in front of a mirror by screwing up the eyes tightly to close them, smiling widely, barring the teeth and winking.

Heat treatment

If you have pain in the face, apply heat three times a day to the painful area. Wring out a face washer after soaking it in very hot water and apply for 10 minutes. Make sure your eye is closed or covered.

General care

Continue normal activities of daily living, but choose a good lifestyle by getting plenty of rest and sleep, and avoiding smoking and excess alcohol. Look after your teeth — brush and floss them more often than usual.

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