

If you have facial paralysis, you are going to have a number of concerns. What is this condition? How will it be treated? Is it a permanent condition? Will I get better?

What is Bell's palsy?

Twitching, weakness, or paralysis of the face are symptoms of a disorder known as Bell's palsy. It is not a disease in itself. Bell's palsy is a form of facial paralysis resulting from damage to the 7th facial nerve. This nerve disorder afflicts approximately 40,000 Americans each year.

Bell's palsy can occur in almost anyone at any age. It is common in women who are expecting, and people who have diabetes, the flu,, or even a cold. Symptoms include one-sided facial paralysis and sometimes you cannot close the eye on the affected side, pain, tearing, drooling, over sensitivity to sound in the affected ear, and lack of being able to taste.

A viral cold sore, herpes simplex, and other herpes viruses are the likely cause of many cases of Bell's palsy as well as Lyme disease.

How do you know if you have Bell's palsy?

There is no test for Bell's palsy but your healthcare provider will look at the appearance of your face and determine whether you can actually move the muscles on the affected side. It is important to see your healthcare provider so that they can rule out other possible causes of facial paralysis.

In most cases, the weakness is limited to one side of the face or, occasionally, to the forehead, eyelid, or mouth. An EMG test can confirm the presence of nerve damage and determine how severe the case is. An Xray of the skull may be done to help rule out infection or tumor. Some providers may do other imaging tests.

How is Bell's palsy treated?

There is no one cure or treatment for Bell's palsy. The condition affects each person differently. Some cases are mild and do not require treatment as the symptoms usually subside on their own within 2 weeks. For others, treatment may include medications and therapy.

Your doctor may prescribe an antiviral drug such as acyclovir along with an anti-inflammatory drug such as prednisone to reduce inflammation and swelling. This may help improve facial function by limiting or reducing damage to the nerve.

Your doctor also may prescribe analgesics such as aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen to relieve any pain or discomfort.

Bell's palsy can interrupt the eyelid's natural blinking function, leaving the eye exposed to irritation and drying. So it is important to keep the eye moist and protect it from debris and injury, especially at night. Eye patches and lubricating eye drops, such as artificial tears or eye ointments or gels, are effective.

Physical therapy to stimulate the facial nerve and help maintain muscle tone may help in some cases. Moist heat applied to the affected side of the face also may help.

Will I get better?

The final outcome for Bell's palsy is generally very good. With or without treatment, most patients begin to get much better within 2 weeks. About 80% recover completely within 3 to 6 months. For some, however, the symptoms may last longer. In a few cases, the symptoms may never completely disappear.

For information, contact the National Institutes of Health's Brain Resources and Information Network (BRAIN) at

BRAIN
PO Box 5801
Bethesda, MD 20824
(800) 352-9424
<http://www.ninds.nih.gov>
Click on "Disorders" then "Bell's palsy".