

Bell's Palsy

What Is Bell's Palsy?

Bell's palsy is also known as “acute facial palsy of unknown cause.” It's a condition in which the muscles on one side of your face become weak or paralyzed. It affects only one side of the face at a time, causing it to droop or become stiff on that side.

It's caused by some kind of trauma to the seventh cranial nerve. This is also called the “facial nerve.” Bell's palsy can happen to anyone. But it seems to occur more often in people who have diabetes or are recovering from viral infections.

Most of the time, symptoms are only temporary.

Bell's Palsy Symptoms

If it happens to you, you may fear you're having a stroke. You're probably not. A stroke that affects your facial muscles would cause muscle weakness in other parts of your body, too.

The symptoms of Bell's palsy tend to come on all of a sudden. You may go to bed one night feeling fine. But when you look in the mirror the next morning, you see that part of your face seems to be drooping.

Some people feel pain behind their ear 1-2 days before they notice any weakness. Others say that sounds seem much louder than normal in the days before they see any other symptoms.

You might also notice the following things before the onset of Bell's palsy (remember that these symptoms will probably only happen on one side of your face):

- You're unable to close your eyelid or blink
- Your eye waters more or less than usual
- Drooling
- Difficulty chewing
- Decreased sense of taste
- Your facial muscles twitch
- Pain or numbness behind your ear

Symptoms of Bell's palsy come on suddenly. Once they happen, they get worse over the next 48 to 72 hours.

The most noticeable sign is weakness and drooping on one side of your face. You'll find it hard to close your eye on that side or make facial expressions like smiling. Your face may even be completely paralyzed on that side. It's rare, but Bell's palsy can sometimes affect the nerves in both sides of your face.

Facial weakness and drooping typically reach their peak within a day or two. Most people start to feel better within a couple of weeks. They usually recover completely

within 3 months. Some people who develop Bell's palsy have a longer recovery period. In rare cases, they may have some permanent symptoms.

Once they happen, symptoms usually get better over the next 3 weeks or so. Most people -- up to 80% -- have no symptoms at all within 3 to 6 months.

Bell's Palsy Causes

Most doctors believe that it's due to damage to the facial nerve, which causes swelling. This nerve passes through a narrow, bony area within the skull. When the nerve swells -- even a little bit -- it pushes against the skull's hard surface. This affects how well the nerve works.

Researchers have long believed that viral infections may also play a role in the development of Bell's palsy. They've found evidence that suggests the herpes simplex 1 virus (a common cause of cold sores) may be responsible for a large number of cases. Other viruses that have a link to Bell's palsy include:

- Adenovirus (respiratory conditions)
- Coxsackievirus (hand-foot-mouth disease)
- Cytomegalovirus
- Epstein-Barr (infectious mononucleosis)
- Herpes zoster (chickenpox and shingles)
- Influenza B (flu)
- Mumps
- Rubella (German measles)

Who Does Bell's Palsy Affect

Bell's palsy most often happens in people between 15 and 60 years of age. It's equally likely to affect men and women. But you may be more likely to get it if you're pregnant, especially during the last 3 months or in the first week after you've given birth. You also have a greater chance of it if you have:

- A respiratory infection such as a cold or the flu
- Diabetes
- An autoimmune disease
- Cold sores
- High blood pressure
- Mononucleosis
- Shingles

Bell's Palsy Diagnosis

There's no lab test for Bell's palsy. Your doctor will examine your face and ask you to make different facial expressions to see how your muscles act. This is usually enough for them to make the diagnosis.

If there's a chance that another condition is at play, your doctor may order an electromyography (EMG) test to measure the electrical activity inside the muscles. This can tell them if the nerves are definitely damaged and if so, how much.

Your doctor may also run an imaging test, such as an MRI or a CT scan, to make sure something like a tumor or bone fracture isn't pressing on your nerves. A blood test can also help rule out diabetes or an infection.

Bell's Palsy Treatment

Most people with this condition make a full recovery whether they get treatment or not. But there are some treatments that may help you heal faster.

Corticosteroids such as prednisone can help ease swelling and make it more likely that your nerve function will get back to normal. They work best if you take if you take them within 72 hours of the start of your symptoms. Taking an antiviral medication like acyclovir and valacyclovir along with the steroids may help restore function, but there isn't definite proof of this.

If your palsy affects your ability to blink and close your affected eye, you'll need to protect it. Use eye drops or an ointment to keep it moist. Wear an eye patch to keep dirt and dust out and moisture in.

Surgery isn't recommended as a treatment option for Bell's Palsy.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call your provider right away if your face droops or you have other symptoms of Bell palsy. Your provider can rule out other, more serious conditions, such as stroke.

Where can I get more information?

For more information about Bell's Palsy go to:

<https://www.webmd.com/brain/understanding-bells-palsy-basics#1>

<https://www.healthline.com/health/bells-palsy>

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/bells-palsy>

<https://rarediseases.org/rare-diseases/bells-palsy/>