

Bell's palsy

What is Bell's palsy?

Bell's palsy is a form of weakness in the muscles of the face that will usually improve. It mostly affects only one side of the face and can result in the face looking uneven.

Bell's palsy is most common in people aged 15-45, although it can affect children and the elderly. It affects men and women equally.

Most people will fully recover, although this can sometimes take many months. About one in 10 people are left with some degree of muscle weakness in their face.

What causes Bell's palsy?

Bell's palsy is caused by swelling or pressure on 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. When swelling occurs in this area, the pressure stops the nerve working properly.

The cause of Bell's palsy is unknown; however, infection or autoimmune responses may play a role.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of Bell's palsy can range from mild weakness to being unable to move the face. Features can include:

- Symptoms appearing suddenly and reaching their worst within 48 hours
- Weakness in one side of the face
- Difficulty controlling movement of your facial muscles
- The mouth drooping and possibly a one-sided smile
- The face feeling 'heavy'
- Having trouble smiling, raising your eyebrows or chewing food
- One eye not closing properly and feeling irritated or dry
- Food tasting different
- Excessive tearing in one eye

Other than these types of symptoms, people are generally well.

Treatment

Bell's palsy will usually recover without treatment, although this can sometimes take many months.

If symptoms have been present for a short time (less than 72 hours), prednisolone (a type of steroid medication) may be used to improve the chances of recovery. Antiviral agents such as acyclovir may also be used if a viral infection is present, although their benefit is not clear.

Eye protection is important. Bell's palsy can cause the patient

to stop blinking, leading to the eye becoming irritated and dry. Keeping the eye moist and protected from irritation, especially at night, is important. Lubricating eye drops, such as artificial tears, eye ointments or gels, and eye patches, are often needed. Talk to your doctor for more information.

Simple pain medication such as paracetamol may be needed if there is pain.

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 keep the eye moist and undamaged. A patch may be necessary to protect the eye, especially at night.

What to expect

The expected outcome for people with Bell's palsy is generally very good. Recovery will depend on the amount of nerve damage. Recovery takes time and the amount of time is different for each person. With or without treatment, most individuals begin to get better within three weeks and most recover completely within six months. The symptoms may last longer for some people. In a few cases, the symptoms may never completely disappear. In rare cases, Bell's palsy may recur, either on the same or the opposite side of the face.

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au