

## **Bell's palsy**

Bell's palsy is a condition which occurs suddenly and involves a paralysis of the facial nerve which controls the facial muscles on one side of the face. Bell's palsy is an alarming and scary condition due to its sudden onset which results in facial weakness or paralysis. One may suddenly be unable to close the eyelid on the affected side, smile or whistle and half your face appears to droop. It is important to see your dentist or doctor right away since steroid and antiviral medications are only effective if given within 72 hours after the onset of Bell's palsy.

Bell's palsy is named for Sir Charles Bell who was a 19th century Scottish surgeon and the first to describe this condition. Bell's palsy is the most common cause of facial paralysis and is not related to strokes. In almost all cases Bell's palsy affects only one side of the face. While Bell's palsy can affect anyone, it rarely affects people under the age of 15 or over the age of 60. Its annual incidence is approximately 20 per 100,000 people. Men and women are affected equally.

Symptoms of Bell's palsy vary from person to person and range in severity from mild weakness to total paralysis. These symptoms may include rapid onset of mild weakness to total paralysis on one side of your face — occurring within hours to days — making it difficult to smile or close your eye on the affected side, twitching, weakness, drooping of the eyelid and corner of the mouth, drooling, dryness of the eye or mouth, impairment of taste, and excessive tearing in one eye. These symptoms, which usually begin suddenly and reach their peak within 48 hours, lead to significant facial distortion. Other symptoms may include pain or discomfort around the jaw and behind the ear, ringing in one or both ears and sensitivity to sound on the affected side, headaches, impaired speech, dizziness, and difficulty eating or drinking. You may find that you have difficulty making facial expressions.

Bell's palsy occurs when the nerve that controls the facial muscles is swollen, inflamed, or compressed, resulting in facial weakness or paralysis. It is not known for sure what is the cause of Bell's palsy but the most common cause appears to be viral infections caused by the virus that causes cold sores or herpes simplex. Other viruses that have been linked to Bell's palsy include the virus that causes chickenpox and shingles (herpes zoster) and the virus that causes mononucleosis (Epstein-Barr). Bell's palsy tends to occur more often in people who are pregnant, especially during the third trimester, or who are in the first week after giving birth, people who have an upper respiratory infection, such as the flu or a cold or people who have diabetes.

Recent studies have shown that when given within 72 hours of the onset of Bell's palsy, steroids such as the steroid prednisone which is used to reduce inflammation and swelling and antivirals such as acyclovir are effective in treating Bell's palsy. Vitamin B is also prescribed and it is important to keep the eye lubricated with drops. Physical therapy to stimulate the facial nerve and help maintain muscle tone can be helpful by preventing permanent shrinkage or shortening of the paralyzed muscles before recovery takes place. Moist heat applied to the affected side of the face may help reduce pain.

In order to prevent serious side effects which may include irreversible damage to the facial nerve causing permanent or partial paralysis, or complications to eye including partial or complete blindness it is important to see your dentist or doctor right away if you have sudden paralysis on one side of the face, are unable to close your eye or smile or your face appears to droop.