

# Acute facial palsy



## Information for patients

Ear Nose and Throat



## What is facial palsy?

Facial palsy is a general medical term describing weakness of one side of the entire face. This is usually as a result of swelling or damage to the facial nerve that controls the muscles of expression.

**This is not to be confused with a stroke, as that usually results in a weakness of the lower half of one side of your face.**

## What does the facial nerve do?

The facial nerve follows a complicated pathway from your brain through the ear onto your cheek to control the muscles in your face.

These muscles are not only involved in facial expression but they help you to:

- Blink
- Close your eyes
- Talk
- Clear foods from the gutter in front of your teeth
- Seal your mouth when eating, drinking and talking
- Produce tears
- Provide taste
- Even protect hearing from loud noise

When the nerve is weak people not only experience facial weakness, but often have:

- A dry painful eye
- Slurred speech
- Escape of food and liquid from the mouth
- Sound sensitivity
- An odd taste and dental problems

Not only is there a physical problem but facial weakness can lead to:

- Loss of confidence
- Feeling embarrassed
- Not wanting to spend time socialising
- Feeling low

## **What causes facial weakness?**

There are a large number of causes for facial weakness.

The most common causes include:

- Bell's palsy thought to be due to activation of the herpes virus on the nerve (cold sore virus)
- Re-activation of the chicken pox virus (shingles) on the nerve (Ramsay Hunt)
- Infection in the middle ear
- Trauma to the nerve (skull fractures, stabbings, gunshot injury)
- Surgical damage (middle ear surgery, saliva gland surgery, jaw surgery, skull base surgery)
- Infections such as Lyme disease
- Neurological conditions such as Guillan-Barre syndrome
- Medical conditions: sarcoidosis and diabetes

## **What can I expect if my facial nerve is damaged?**

At first, the weakness may cause the following on the affected side of your face:

- The affected side will feel heavy or floppy
- You may have a blocked nose on the affected side
- Food and liquids may escape from the corner of your mouth
- You may have an odd metallic taste
- You may have slurred speech
- You may have sensitivity to loud noise
- Your eye may feel dry and tired

## **How long does the nerve take to recover?**

Recovery is very dependent on what caused the injury or damage in the first place. If the nerve has remained intact and it is simply swelling due to inflammation or infection it should show signs of recovery over an 8 week period.

If the nerve has been cut, it may take a lot longer to heal. In general a year is given to monitor recovery and even then the nerve function may never fully recover

## **How do I know the nerve is recovering?**

When the nerve starts to recover you may notice:

- Tingling
- Movement in your cheek
- Possible tightness around the cheek and eye
- Unco-ordinated movements (eye blinking causing movement around the mouth and neck). This is called synkinesis.

With recovery and input from specialist physiotherapy, synkinesis can often be resolved. Occasionally botox and surgery may be needed.

## **Is there any medication that can help recovery?**

Treatment is very dependent on the cause. However, for Bell's palsy, shingles and other inflammatory conditions your doctor may well prescribe a short course of oral steroids.

If there is any concern regarding middle ear disease, trauma or tumours you will need a specialist's opinion.

## **What can I do to help my face recover?**

There are a number of things that you can do whilst the nerve is recovering. These include:

- Eye care
- Massage
- Gentle facial movements
- Taping of your face
- Oral care

## Eye care:

This is incredibly important and must not be ignored when you have a facial weakness. Not only are you unable to blink in order to protect the eye and spread tears, but tear production is reduced. This can result in a dry, painful eye and potential damage to the lining of the coloured portion of the eye leading to infection and loss of vision.

As part of eye care you will need to:

- Apply drops and lubrication into your eye on a regular basis (these need to be preservative free). See picture on how to apply drops correctly (Fig 1)
- Try and avoid dry, dusty environments
- Avoid fan heaters, open windows in cars and air conditioning if possible
- Wear protective wrap around eye wear, particularly in windy or dusty conditions
- Avoid getting soap and shampoo in your eyes. You may want to wear swim goggles when washing your hair
- If your eye does not fully close, tape it closed at night and/or during the day (Fig 2). You may also want to consider taping the lower lid to support it and prevent it from drooping
- Undertake manual blinking to spread natural and artificial tears as often as possible (Fig 2). Be mindful of this particularly if watching television, working on a computer or reading
- Stretch upper eyelids to help recovery of your blink (Fig 3)



Tilt your head back and look at the ceiling. Gently pull lower lid down until there is a small pocket.



Squeeze the bottle or tube to release a drop into eye. If using ointment apply along the line shown by the arrow. Do not touch eye with bottle or tube.

**Fig 1**



**Fig 2 - Assisted closure/manual blink**



**Fig 3 - Upper lid stretch**

If your eye becomes red and painful please do not ignore this and seek urgent medical advice

## Massage:

Whilst your face is recovering it is important to massage the good and weak side of your face. This will keep the muscles flexible, encourage blood supply, identify tight areas in your face and preserve the idea of facial movement.

This needs to be done twice a day. Set aside a time to do this when you can relax and thoroughly complete the facial massage.

### General principles for massage

1. Use the pads of your fingers and apply firm but gentle pressure – enough to move the muscles underneath the skin but not distort your features.
2. Massage in a circular movement for 1-2 minutes for each muscle group. Lie down to do your massage if you can. The aim is firm but gentle circular massage. Start from the scalp, then brow and work downwards.

### Brow and temple massage (Figs 4 and 5)

- Place the pads of your fingers above your eyebrows
- Massage using a slow circular, upward movement
- Use enough pressure to move the muscle underneath the skin
- You could also move in a zig zag pattern across your forehead
- Do this for 1-2 minutes



- Place the pads of your fingers against your temples
- Massage using a slow circular, upward movement
- Use enough pressure to move the muscle underneath the skin
- Do this for 1-2 minutes



### **Cheek massage (Fig 6)**

- Using your fingers, make slow, circular upward movements over your cheeks
- Work from the jaw bone to the cheek bone
- Use enough pressure to move the muscles underneath the skin
- Do this for 1-2 minutes



### **Chin massage (Fig 7)**

- Use the pads of your thumbs or index fingers and apply firm but gentle pressure
- Massage using a slow circular, upward movement
- Use enough pressure to move the muscles underneath the skin
- Do this for 1-2 minutes
- You can also use your knuckles to gently massage the chin area



## **Gentle facial movements**

It is important that you do not try too hard to overwork the face whilst it is recovering. This may result in overactive tight muscles on the good side and can promote unwanted muscle movement (synkinesis) on the weak side. You can stand in front of a mirror or practice gentle and careful expressions in slow controlled precise fashion. These may include:

- Gentle closing of the eyes (after stretching Fig 3)
- Gentle open mouth smile
- Pouting of lips

This needs to be done after stretching and massage (Fig 4, 5, 6 and 7)

## **Taping of the face**

Eye care is extremely important and good taping techniques can avoid problems with the eye, particularly if it is tired, dry and will not shut. Please refer to Fig 2 which demonstrates the correct taping techniques.

## **What can I expect after my visit to the specialist?**

You may have several further tests arranged which may include:

- Blood tests
- CT and/or MRI scans
- Appointments to see physiotherapists with an interest in facial rehabilitation
- Opinions from eye doctors (ophthalmologists) and plastic surgeons

Your clinician may refer you to see a specialist who has an interest in facial weakness who will monitor your progress and co-ordinate your care between different specialist teams. Occasionally this may involve referrals to other Trusts.

### **For further information please visit;**

- <https://fts-uk.org/>
- [www.facialpalsy.org.uk](http://www.facialpalsy.org.uk)

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