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Bell's Palsy

General Description

Bell's palsy is an acute, rapidly progressive condition involving the facial nerve. Although the disorder is fairly common, affecting 20 in every 20,000 persons, the underlying cause is unknown. Only rarely is it associated with pregnancy, Lyme's disease, cancer of the parotid gland, or multiple sclerosis. Some investigators have provided evidence of a relationship with herpes simplex virus type 1.

Signs and Symptoms

The diagnosis is based on clinical observation of weakness of one side of the face. Maximum weakness is usually reached within 48 hours after onset of the condition. The parotid gland should be palpated to check for an underlying mass or inflammation. Some patients report having a viral illness (flu, cold, sinusitis) about 7 to 10 days prior to the onset of facial paralysis. Other symptoms include alteration of taste and hypersensitivity to sound. Patients with Bell's palsy may have difficulty closing one eye leading to excessive dryness of the cornea.

Treatment

Treatment is mainly supportive since most cases of Bell's palsy resolve on its own. However, patients with Bell's palsy need to be carefully monitored for complications arising from excessive corneal exposure and dryness. The most common complications include corneal ulceration, infections, and abrasions. Eyedrop lubricants are used often during the daytime to prevent the cornea from drying. Some patients need to tape the eyes closed at night. Treatment with medication is controversial. Some patients may benefit with oral prednisone (up to 70 mg/day) combined with acyclovir (400 mg used five times a day) for up to ten days. Surgery for treating the facial nerve in Bell's palsy is not usually necessary.

Prognosis

Statistics on Bell's palsy show the following:

Age 4 to 50 years – 74% to 83% have complete recovery

Age 80 and above – 50% have complete recovery

Pregnancy – 50% have complete recovery

Patients who show some improvement within five days after the onset of symptoms will probably recover completely.

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