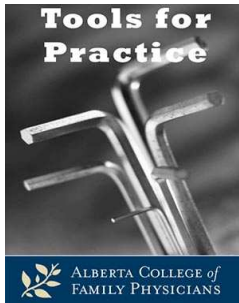


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Bell's Palsy: What to do and not to do?

Clinical Question:

Do corticosteroids or anti-viral medications provide any benefit to patients with Bell's Palsy?

Evidence:

Two recent well-designed randomized controlled trials examined corticosteroids and anti-virals in treating Bell's Palsy.

- Scottish study¹: 551 patients presenting within 72 hours received 10 days of: Acyclovir 400mg 5x/day and Prednisolone 25mg BID together or each separately or placebo.
 - Prednisolone, compared to placebo, resulted in statistically significant improved chance of complete recovery:
 - At 3 months, 83% versus 64%, Number Needed to Treat (NNT)=6
 - At 9 months, 94% versus 82%, NNT =8.
 - Acyclovir offered no advantage over placebo.
- Scandinavian study²: 839 patients presenting within 72 hours received: Valacyclovir 1000mg TID x 7days and Prednisolone (60mg x5days then tapered by 10 mg/day) or each separately or placebo.
 - Prednisolone, compared to placebo, resulted in statistically significant improved chance of complete recovery at 12 months, NNT =7
 - Valacyclovir offered no advantage over placebo.

Adding Acyclovir¹ or Valacyclovir² to Prednisolone offered no advantage over Prednisolone alone.

Context:

- Before these trials, Cochrane reviewers concluded there was insufficient evidence to recommend either anti-virals³ or corticosteroids⁴ for Bell's palsy.
- A 2007 Japanese study⁵ found Valacyclovir added to Prednisolone offered a statistically significant improved chance of recovery over Prednisolone alone (NNT 15). However,
 - The study was smaller (296 patients), had high drop-out, and lacked blinding.

- Another Japanese study the same year found no benefit adding Valcyclovir to Prednisolone.⁶
- The two most recent studies^{1, 2} are larger, superior methodologically, and found anti-viral therapies added to Prednisolone provides no benefit over Prednisolone alone.
- The dosing of Prednisolone and Prednisone is equal (e.g. Prednisolone 25mg BID equals Prednisone 25mg BID).

Bottom-line: The best evidence indicates that corticosteroids (in doses of Prednisolone 25mg BID or 60mg x 5days then tapered by 10mg/day) improve the odds of complete recovery from Bell's Palsy but anti-virals, used either alone or in addition to Prednisolone, seem to offer no advantage.

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1. [NEJM 2007; 357: 1598-607.](#)
2. [Lancet Neurol. 2008; 7: 993-1000.](#)
3. [Cochrane 2004; 3: CD001869.](#)
4. [Cochrane 2004; 4: CD001942.](#)
5. [Otol Neurotol 2007; 28: 408-413.](#)
6. [Laryngoscope. 2007; 117: 147-56.](#)

Tools for Practice is a biweekly article summarizing medical evidence with a focus on topical issues and practice modifying information. It is coordinated by G. Michael Allan, MD, CCFP and the content is written by practising family physicians. Archived articles are available on the Toward Optimized Practice website.

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