

Ramsay Hunt Syndrome: Your First Two Weeks

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You have Ramsay Hunt syndrome. It is shingles in the nerve that moves one side of your face. The chickenpox virus you had as a child stayed in your body and has flared up in that nerve. That is why one side of your face is weak, and why your ear hurts and may have blisters.

Most people get better, though full recovery is less common than with Bell's palsy. What you do in the next two weeks matters. Take your medicine on time and protect your eye.

Your medicine

You will likely have two prescriptions. The antiviral, usually valacyclovir, fights the virus and is taken for about a week. The steroid, usually prednisone, reduces swelling around the nerve. Its dose steps down over one to two weeks.

Start both right away. Shingles treatment works best in the first three days. Finish the antiviral even if you feel better, and do not stop the steroid early. Call your clinician before you change anything. If you have diabetes, check your blood sugar more often while you take the steroid.

Your eye

If your eyelid does not close all the way, the eye dries out while you are awake. A dry cornea scratches easily, and a scratched cornea can damage your vision.

Use lubricating eye drops through the day, as often as every hour or two. At bedtime, put in eye ointment and tape the lid closed with paper tape, or wear a moisture chamber, a clear plastic shield that seals over the eye. Make sure the eye is fully closed before you tape it. Do not use a cloth eye patch. It can rub the eye.

Call your clinician the same day if your eye hurts, turns red, or your vision blurs.

Pain, hearing and balance

Ear pain can be severe. Tell your clinician if your pain medicine is not helping. Some people keep nerve pain after the rash heals. This is more common in older adults.

About half of people with Ramsay Hunt syndrome lose some hearing on the affected side. Ask for a hearing test. If your hearing drops suddenly, get seen right away. Ringing in the ear and dizziness are also common. Sit on the edge of the bed for a minute before you stand up.

Eating

Take small bites and chew on your strong side. Food can collect in the cheek on the weak side, so check it after meals and rinse. Food may taste different for a while.

Spreading the virus

You cannot give someone shingles. You can give chickenpox to a person who has never had chickenpox or the vaccine. The virus is in the fluid of your blisters until they scab over, so keep the rash covered until then. Blisters can also form inside the ear or mouth. Stay away from pregnant women who are not immune, babies born early or at a low birth weight, and anyone with a weakened immune system. Ask your clinician when you are no longer contagious.

Recovery

Movement usually starts to return within a few weeks. Full recovery can take up to a year. In a Finnish study, more than 8 in 10 people who started an antiviral within three days of diagnosis ended up with normal or near-normal movement. Some people keep mild weakness or tightness. Others notice the eye closes when they smile, which is called synkinesis. A facial therapist may be able to help.

When to get help

Call 911 for new weakness in an arm or leg, trouble speaking, confusion, or a sudden severe headache. These can be signs of a stroke or of the virus affecting the brain.

Call your clinician the same day for eye pain or redness, blurred vision, a sudden drop in hearing, a rash that spreads beyond your face, or if you cannot keep your medicine down.

After you recover

Ask about the shingles vaccine, Shingrix. It is recommended for adults 50 and older and for adults 19 and older with a weakened immune system. It lowers the chance of shingles coming back. It does not treat an active case.

Questions for your next visit

- Is my eye closing well enough, or should I see an eye doctor?
- When should I have a hearing test?
- When am I no longer contagious?
- Should I see a facial therapist?

Support for patients and families: Ramsay Hunt Syndrome Foundation, ramsayhuntfoundation.org. Its eye care page has more tips on taping and eye protection.

This handout is for general education. It does not replace advice from your own clinician. September 2026. Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024 and 2025. Baugh et al., 2013. Chandrasekhar et al., 2019. Dalrymple et al., 2023. Kanerva et al., 2020. Ramsay Hunt Syndrome Foundation, Eye care, accessed October 2026.

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