

Trigeminal neuralgia

What is it?

This is a disorder of the trigeminal nerve (fifth cranial nerve).

What are the symptoms?

It produces episodes of severe, stabbing pain affecting the cheek, lips, gums, or chin on one side of the face. The pain is very brief, lasting only a few seconds to minutes. However, it is often so intense that you are unable to do anything during an attack.

Attacks occur in bouts that may last for weeks at a time. Pain-free intervals between attacks tend to become shorter with time.

What causes it?

The cause of trigeminal neuralgia is uncertain. The pain nearly always starts from one trigger point on the face and can be brought on by:-

- touching the face,
- washing,
- shaving,
- eating,
- drinking,
- talking.

How is it treated?

A medicine called carbamazepine suppresses the pain in most sufferers. However, a few people develop resistance to this medicine or are unable to tolerate a high enough dosage to relieve the pain. In these cases there are other medicines that can be tried. Your ward doctor will discuss this with you.

If treatment with medicine fails, we may suggest surgery.

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(Written by a consultant geriatrician and checked by volunteer readers)

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