



Disclaimer: This leaflet provides general information and should not be used as a substitute for professional medical advice. It is essential to consult with a qualified healthcare professional for any health concerns or before making any decisions related to your health or treatment.

Overview

Atypical facial pain (now known as persistent idiopathic facial pain or PIFP) is a long-term condition characterized by constant pain in the face, often described as aching, burning, or throbbing. The pain can vary in intensity and may affect one or both sides of the face. It's important to understand that "idiopathic" means the exact cause is unknown, and "persistent" means it's ongoing. This can be frustrating, but with the right management strategies, you can learn to control the pain and minimise its impact on your life. PIFP is not life-threatening.

Symptoms and Causes

Symptoms:

- **Constant facial pain** – This is the main symptom, varying from a dull ache to a sharp, burning or throbbing sensation.
- **Pain location** – Can be anywhere on the face but often involves the cheek, area around the eye, forehead, temple, jaw, or teeth/gums on one or both sides.
- **Changes in pain intensity** – The pain may fluctuate throughout the day and can worsen with stress or fatigue.
- **Other symptoms** – Some individuals also experience headaches, neck pain, or other pains elsewhere in the body, such as irritable bowel syndrome.

Causes:

- **Unknown** – The exact cause of PIFP is not fully understood, but it's considered a neuropathic pain condition. This suggests a problem with how the nerves in your face send and receive pain signals. There may also be a disruption to pain pathways in the brain.
- **Triggers** – While no specific cause has been identified, some people report their pain beginning after a minor injury, dental work, or sinus infection. However, it persists long after the initial incident should have healed.
- **Not Psychological** – While emotional factors, such as stress, can influence the intensity of PIFP, they are not the root cause of the condition.

Diagnosis and Investigations

Diagnosing PIFP involves ruling out other potential causes of facial pain. Your doctor will likely follow this process:

- **Medical History:** A detailed discussion about your symptoms, including the location, intensity, duration, and any triggers.
- **Physical Examination:** Checking your face, jaw, and neck for any signs of physical abnormalities.
- **Dental Examination:** To rule out dental problems as the source of the pain.
- **Imaging:** X-rays, CT scans, or MRI scans of your face, jaw, or head may be recommended to exclude structural problems.
- **Blood Tests:** To check for any underlying medical conditions.
- **Diagnostic Nerve Blocks:** Injections of local anaesthetic to numb specific nerves may help pinpoint the source of your pain. This may rule out other neuropathic conditions like trigeminal neuralgia.

Management and Treatment

There's no single cure for PIFP, and treatment focuses on managing the pain and improving your quality of life. Your doctor may recommend a combination of therapies:

Medication:

- **Tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs):** Amitriptyline (prescription only) can help manage PIFP even if you're not depressed. They work by affecting brain chemicals involved in pain processing. A typical starting dose might be 10mg at night, increasing gradually under medical supervision if needed.
- **Anticonvulsants:** Gabapentin or Pregabalin (prescription only) are commonly used to treat neuropathic pain by reducing nerve signals. Starting doses are typically low and gradually increased according to response and tolerance.
- **Pain Relievers:** Standard over-the-counter pain relievers like paracetamol or ibuprofen are usually not very effective for chronic nerve pain.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT): This type of talking therapy can help you develop coping mechanisms to manage your pain, reduce stress, and improve your overall well-being.

Other Therapies: Relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga, or mindfulness, can help manage stress and pain. Regular exercise and pacing your activities can also help. Acupuncture or Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) may also provide relief for some.

Prevention

As the cause of PIFP is unknown, there's no specific way to prevent it. However, managing stress and maintaining good overall health may help reduce the risk of developing chronic pain conditions.

Outlook / Prognosis

PIFP is a chronic condition, and while it can be effectively managed, it doesn't usually go away completely. However, many people with PIFP are able to significantly reduce their pain levels and improve their quality of life through the treatment strategies outlined above. Remember, consistency with treatment is key, and open communication with your healthcare team is essential for successful pain management.