

Charles Bonnet Syndrome or Visual Hallucinations Following Sight Loss

What is Charles Bonnet Syndrome?

Charles Bonnet Syndrome is the name given to explain the situation when people with sight problems start to see things that they know are not real.

Sometimes called visual hallucinations, the things that people see can take all kinds of forms, from simple patterns of straight lines to detailed pictures of people or buildings. These images can be enjoyable, frightening and/or sometimes upsetting.

Who is affected by Charles Bonnet Syndrome?

If you already attend the outpatients department within the hospital all that is required is to ask the ophthalmologist at your next visit if you are eligible for registration. If you are not attending the hospital then ask your family doctor to refer you to a named consultant ophthalmologist (in writing) to the consultant giving their name not just "Dear Doctor".

What causes Charles Bonnet Syndrome?

When a person's sight is failing there are not as many signals being sent to the visual part of their brain. The under stimulated brain may start generating signals of its own to fill the gaps. This seems to happen more when people are sitting alone, somewhere quiet which is familiar to them, or when they are lying in bed at night.

What kind of things do people see?

There seems to be two different kinds of things people see. Both of them may be in either black and white or colour, involve movement or stay still and may seem real. There may be hallucinations of patterns and lines which may look like mosaic, brickwork or tiles, or pictures of people and places.

Often whole scenes will appear such as landscapes or groups of people, which are sometimes life size and other times tiny. These pictures may last for a few minutes or several hours. Many people begin to recognise similar things appearing in their visions such as distorted faces or the same tiny people in costumes.

What are the effects of the hallucinations?

Sometimes the complicated pictures can make it difficult to get around. For example, streets and rooms may have their shape changed and this can make it difficult for you to judge exactly where you are.

The complicated pictures can sometimes be scary. Although the visions themselves may not be of anything frightening it is disturbing to start seeing strangers in your house or garden. People often overcome this by getting to know the figures in their visions.

It is normal to worry about seeing things and a lot of people keep quiet about their hallucinations in case people think they are losing their minds. It is very important to realise that failing eyesight and not any other mental problems normally cause this syndrome.

Is there a cure for Charles Bonnet syndrome?

Unfortunately there is no known cure or treatment for this condition. Frequently the visual hallucinations stop on their own in response to an improvement or further deterioration of vision. Knowing that it is poor vision and not mental illness that is causing these images often helps people to come to terms with them.

It is worth trying to change things when the visions occur to see if it will help them disappear. For example, if it happens in the dark then try switching a light on or if it happens in the light try switching the light off. Opening and closing the eyes, concentrating on something else or looking or walking away may help.

Sometimes talking about your feelings can help. If you are having problems, talking to your GP may be a good way to find some help.

Other sources of support are listed below.

Henshaws Society for Blind People

Atherton House
88-92 Talbot Road
Manchester
M16 0GS
Telephone: 0300 222 5555
Email: info@manchester.org.uk
Web: www.henshaws.org.uk

Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)

RNIB Helpline
PO Box 173
Peterborough
Cambridgeshire
PE2 2XU
Tel: 0303 123 9999
www.rnib.org.uk

The RNIB can let you know about local support groups for people with sight problems.

Partially Sighted Society

The Partially Sighted Society
1 Bennetthorpe
Doncaster
DN2 6AA
Tel: 01302 965195
Email Orders and Information: reception@partsight.org.uk

The partially sighted society is able to give advice on coping with sight loss.

Macular Disease Society

Crown Chambers
South Street
Andover
Hampshire
SP10 2BN
Tel: 0300 3030111 / 01264350551
www.macularsociety.org
Helpline: help@macularsociety.org
General enquiries: info@macularsociety.org