



North Shore Eye Centre

North Shore Medical Centre · Level 1 Suite 5, 66 Pacific Highway · St Leonards NSW 2065 · AUSTRALIA
Tel: 02 9439 9649 · Email: info@northshoreeye.com.au · Web: www.northshoreeye.com.au

CHARLES BONNET SYNDROME

What is Charles Bonnet Syndrome?

Charles Bonnet syndrome (CBS) is a term used to describe the situation when some people with sight problems start to see images that are not really there. The visual hallucinations can be persistent images that take many different forms from simple patterns of straight lines to complex and detailed pictures.

What is Visual Hallucination?

Visual hallucination is the perception of an object or image when it is not actually present. Hallucinations are different to illusions, in which existing objects are misinterpreted or misjudged. Visual hallucinations can occur in various medical, neurological, ocular, and psychiatric disorders as well as conditions induced by drug use.

Types of visual hallucinations

Visual hallucinations are classified as simple or complex. The simple type includes images of flashes of lights, lines or patterns (zigzags or shapes) in the vision. Simple hallucinations can occur in eye conditions such as vitreous detachment, optic neuritis or in other conditions such as migraine and brain tumours.

Complex visual hallucinations are usually well formed images and often involve animals, figures and scenery. These can be associated with dementia, Parkinson's disease, misuse of recreational drugs and schizophrenia. Complex visual hallucination can also be caused by CBS.



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Features of the hallucinations in Charles Bonnet Syndrome

The main features are vivid and detailed visual hallucinations in a person with visual impairment, who recognises the unreality of what he or she is seeing. In CBS there are no accompanying features of psychosis, dementia, and intoxication. The syndrome occurs most commonly in elderly people, most likely because of the greater incidence of visual impairment in this group. The common condition leading to this syndrome is macular degeneration, but it can also occur with glaucoma and cataract. These hallucinations can be momentary or may last most of the day, changing in frequency and complexity. The images are variable and may include groups of people, animals and landscapes. They can be black and white or in colour and can involve movement or remain still.

What causes Charles Bonnet Syndrome?

Normally, both eyes collect detailed information about images and these details are then transferred to and processed in the brain. The brain makes interpretations of the images that are seen. It is thought that if both eyes develop vision loss, the brain is not receiving details of images as previously, and it will often produce its own images as it attempts to process the damaged image that is being received. These experiences seem to occur mainly in restful periods for example when people are sitting alone, at a quiet place, or when lying in bed at night.

Who is affected by Charles Bonnet Syndrome?

Charles Bonnet syndrome affects people who develop visual impairment. Not all people with low vision will experience visual hallucinations, however some may have symptoms for months or even years. When the brain learns to adjust to the vision impairment, the visual hallucinations usually disappear.

Do these hallucinations mean there is a mental problem?



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CBS is not a condition that is related to mental health. The images occur when a person is fully conscious and do not occur in combination with nonexistent sounds and is not related to any of the other senses.

The difference between hallucinations seen by people with mental health problems and those seen by people with CBS is that in CBS, people realise that the hallucinations are not real. On the other hand, people with a mental health difficulties have trouble identifying the difference between hallucinations and reality, and will often create complicated explanations for the images seen.

Is there treatment for Charles Bonnet Syndrome?

There is no cure or treatment for CBS. There are a number of people who do not report the symptoms for the fear of being labelled as mentally unwell. However, understanding that the syndrome is not related to mental illness is often a major relief in itself. Treatment with medication remains unsatisfactory. Non medical interventions, such as increasing the lighting at home and reducing social isolation by encouraging interpersonal contact may be helpful.

Other sources of support

At present, North Shore Eye Centre is not aware of any specialised support group for people who are affected by Charles Bonnet Syndrome. However, there are support groups and services available for people who are affected by vision loss.

Macular Degeneration Foundation
www.mdfoundation.com.au
ph: (02) 92618900

Vision Australia
www.visionaustralia.org.au
ph: (02) 93343333
1300 847 466