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Eyes - Charles Bonnet syndrome

Eyes - Charles Bonnet syndrome
Charles Bonnet syndrome refers to the visual hallucinations caused by the brain’s adjustment to significant vision loss. It occurs most often among the elderly who are more likely than any other age group to have eye conditions that affect sight, such as age-related macular degeneration.

Many people who suffer from Charles Bonnet syndrome do not consult with their doctor out of fear and embarrassment, as hallucinations are associated with mental illness. Estimates vary, but it is thought that about one person in every two with vision loss may experience hallucinations, which means Charles Bonnet syndrome is very common. Despite this, most people are not aware of this condition.

Research suggests that many people who suffer from Charles Bonnet syndrome do not consult their doctor out of fear and embarrassment, as hallucinations are associated with mental illness. In most cases, the hallucinations go away as the brain adapts.

Causes of Charles Bonnet syndrome

The underlying mechanism of Charles Bonnet syndrome is not understood. Doctors know that vision loss triggers the visual hallucinations. It is not clear how the brain stores visual information, but we know that visual information from the eyes stops the brain from creating its own images. Perhaps the loss of visual information from the eyes allows the brain to ‘play’ with its stored picture library.

Symptoms of Charles Bonnet syndrome

The signs and symptoms of Charles Bonnet syndrome include:

- Significant vision loss
- Visual hallucinations
- No control over the hallucinations
- A realisation that the hallucinations aren’t real.

Types of hallucinations in Charles Bonnet syndrome

Generally, the hallucinations tend to occur when the person is alone, quiet and in a familiar environment, for example, when lying awake in bed.

The two types of visual hallucination most common to Charles Bonnet syndrome include:

- Simple – such as patterns and lines, for example, the person may see brickwork images, netting or mosaics
- Complicated – such as seeing people, buildings, landscapes or places. Complicated hallucinations are more likely to occur in people with severe vision loss.

Features of Charles Bonnet hallucinations

The features of hallucinations can vary widely from one episode to the next and from one person to the next. For example, the images may be:

- colour, or black and white
- static like a photograph, or moving like an event in real life
- life-sized, or reduced in size
- realistic (such as animals from the real world), or fantastic (such as mythological monsters)
- brief (they continue for a few minutes), or lengthy (they persist for a few hours)
- enjoyable like a pleasant dream, or frightening like a nightmare
- meaningless and random, or featuring familiar people or familiar places
- different every time, or a person may see the same items in every hallucination.

Complications of Charles Bonnet syndrome

A person with Charles Bonnet syndrome has no control over their hallucinations. They may cause issues in their everyday life because:

- The hallucinations overlay images of the real world, so the person may have trouble negotiating everyday tasks, such as walking through an unfamiliar environment.
- The person may not know at first whether the image is real or imagined, which can be frightening if they are seeing, for example, a stranger in the house.
- Seeing things that aren’t there is distressing, even if the images are pleasant.
- The person may fear they are going mad or exhibiting signs of dementia.
Other causes of visual hallucinations

Visual hallucinations may have causes other than Charles Bonnet syndrome, including:

- dementia
- some forms of mental illness
- stroke
- oestrogen replacement therapy
- parkinson’s disease
- psychotic drugs such as cannabis
- blindness in one side of the visual field (hemianopia)
- pituitary tumour
- short-term after-effects of cataract surgery
- kidney dialysis that includes the hormone erythropoietin.

Diagnosis of Charles Bonnet syndrome

Diagnosis of Charles Bonnet syndrome may include:

- your medical history
- a physical examination
- an eye examination
- medical tests to rule out other causes of visual hallucinations.

Treatment for Charles Bonnet syndrome

In most cases, Charles Bonnet syndrome resolves itself after about 12 to 18 months without treatment. It is a good idea to find out everything you can about Charles Bonnet syndrome. Understanding the condition can help to reduce feelings of anxiety and helplessness. Sometimes the hallucinations don’t go away, but there is no medical cure.

Depending on the severity of the condition, treatment may include:

- Medical advice – talking it over with a doctor or counsellor can be helpful.
- Vision therapy – low-vision rehabilitation may help to ease symptoms.
- Moving your eyes – some people report that the hallucinations dissipate if they move their gaze from side to side or up and down.
- Changing the variables – to ‘turn off’ the hallucination, you could try altering the environment or setting that you are in. For example: if it’s dark, turn on the light, or if you’re standing up, sit down. If your eyes are open, shut them, or if you’re in one room, go to another room.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Optometrist
- Ophthalmologist
- Vision Australia Tel. 1300 84 74 66
- Macular Degeneration Foundation Tel. 1800 111 709
- Charles Bonnet Syndrome Foundation Tel. 1300 121 123

Things to remember

- Charles Bonnet syndrome refers to the visual hallucinations caused by the brain’s adjustment to significant vision loss.
- It occurs most often among the elderly who are more likely than any other age group to have eye conditions that affect sight, such as age-related macular degeneration.
- Many people who suffer from Charles Bonnet syndrome do not consult with their doctor out of fear and embarrassment, as hallucinations are associated with mental illness.

References

- How MD affects vision, section on Phantom Vision or Charles Bonnet Syndrome (CBS), Macular Degeneration Foundation. More information here.

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More information

Eyes

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as

Active Tab

- Eye basics
Eye injuries and irritations

Eye conditions

Vision change and loss

Vision aids and treatment

Living with vision loss

Eye basics

- 10 tips for good eye health
  Most vision problems are avoidable or can be treated so have your eyes regularly checked by an optometrist or other eye care health professional...

- Eye care - optometrists
  A standard eye examination with an optometrist includes a screening for all common eye diseases, such as glaucoma and cataracts...

- Eye care - orthoptists
  Orthoptists assist in the diagnosis and treatment of eye disease...

- Eye safety at work
  Wearing eye protection appropriate for the task can significantly reduce the risk of injury...

- Eyes - common problems
  You can help prevent dry eyes and minimise the risk of tired or sore eyes while reading or using a computer...

- Eyes explained
  The eye's complicated design means that an image can pass through its many layers and end up crisply focused on the retina...

- Eye tests
  Regular eye tests or check-ups detect problems early, so you can have early treatment to minimise any permanent damage to your eyes...

- Short-sightedness
  If you are short-sighted, you will have trouble seeing objects clearly in the distance and they will appear blurry...

- Smoking and eye disease
  Smoking is thought to be a factor in age-related macular degeneration and blindness...

Eye injuries and irritations

- Dry eye
  A person suffering from dry eye syndrome does not have enough of the right kind of tears to keep the eye comfortable...

- Eye floaters
  Some eye floaters look like small dots, while others appear like threads or little hairy clumps...

- Eye injuries - chemical burns
  Always wear safety goggles or a face shield when handling liquid or powdered chemicals...

- Eye injuries - foreign body in the eye
  Don't try to remove a foreign body from your eye - go to your doctor or hospital emergency department for help...

- Eyes - blocked tear duct
  Some babies are born with a blocked tear duct, but other events, including infection and trauma to the nose, can cause a blocked tear duct...

- Eyes - flash burns
  Flash burns are like sunburn in the eye and can affect both your eyes. Find out more...

- Styes
  Styes may be red and sore, but they generally do not cause any damage to the eye or eyelids...

Eye conditions

- Blepharospasm
  Blepharospasm means involuntary twitching, blinking, closure or squeezing of the eyelids...

- Cataracts
A cataract of the eye is like the lens of a camera becoming fogged up...

- Colour blindness
  People who are colourblind can't see some colours or see them differently from other people. Colour blindness is inherited, and affects more boys than girls. Out of 20 boys, it is likely that one or...

- Conjunctivitis
  Conjunctivitis is an eye infection caused by a bacteria or virus. Symptoms include eye redness, a discharge and swollen lids. Conjunctivitis is treated with antibacterial eye drops or ointment...

- Diabetic retinopathy
  Without treatment, diabetic retinopathy can cause loss of vision and blindness...

- Eyes - giant cell arteritis
  Giant cell arteritis is inflammation of the arteries that can cause sudden blindness in one or both eyes...

- Eyes - glaucoma
  Glaucoma can happen at any age and without early detection can lead to permanent vision loss and blindness...

- Eyes - optic neuritis
  Optic neuritis is inflammation of the optic nerve that causes blurred, grey and dim vision...

- Eyes - retinitis pigmentosa
  Retinitis pigmentosa is the collective name for a range of diseases that damage the retina and cause vision to fade...

- Eyes - trachoma
  A clean face and clean environment are the best protection against trachoma...

- Eyes - uveitis
  Uveitis can cause vision problems if it is not treated...

- Pterygium
  A pterygium is a fleshy overgrowth of the conjunctiva that may affect one or both eyes...

Vision change and loss

- Eyes - age-related macular degeneration
  Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is a type of vision loss where there is a distortion or absence of the central field of vision...

- Eyes - long-sightedness
  A significant amount of long-sightedness can lead to blurred vision, particularly for close objects...

- Eyes - refractive errors
  Refractive errors are common eye disorders causing blurry vision and are related to the focusing ability of your eyes...

- Short-sightedness
  If you are short-sighted, you will have trouble seeing objects clearly in the distance and they will appear blurry...

- Vision loss - neurological
  Neurological vision impairment (ABI VI) is vision loss caused by damage to the areas of the brain that are responsible for sight...

Vision aids and treatment

- Corneal transplantation and donation
  Corneal transplant surgery would not be possible without generous donors and their families, who have donated corneal tissue so that others may see...

- Eyes - contact lenses
  Proper care of your contact lenses will help avoid irritation or damage to your eyes...

- Eyes - laser eye surgery
  During laser eye surgery, a computer-controlled laser is used to remove microscopic amounts of tissue from the front surface of the eye...

- Vision therapy

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Vision therapy is effective for everyone; however, its impact is greatest in children and young adults.

Living with vision loss

- **Braille**
  Braille is a reading and writing system for blind and vision impaired people, made up of raised dots that can be "read" by touch.

- **Vision loss and sport**
  Many sports can be adapted to suit people who are blind or have low vision.

- **Vision loss - living with a guide dog**
  Guide dogs are intelligent animals that thrive on the challenge of helping their handlers.

- **Vision loss - occupational therapy**
  Occupational therapy for people with vision impairment offers new strategies and alternative ways to do things.

- **Vision loss - offering assistance**
  When you meet a person who is blind or has low vision, ask them if they want help.

- **Vision loss - recreational activities**
  Many recreational activities can be reworked to suit a person who is blind or has low vision.

- **Vision loss - safety around the home**
  There are many ways to improve home safety for people whose vision is deteriorating.

- **Vision loss - social events**
  With planning and preparation, most social events can be adapted to suit people with vision loss.

- **Vision loss - training guide dogs**
  Guide dogs are specially bred and trained to enable people who are blind or vision impaired to achieve freedom and independence.

Related Information

- **Eyes - uveitis**
  Iritis can cause vision problems if it is not treated.

- **Cataracts**
  A cataract of the eye is like the lens of a camera becoming fogged up.

- **Blepharospasm**
  Blepharospasm means involuntary twitching, blinking, closure or squeezing of the eyelids.

- **Eyes - giant cell arteritis**
  Giant cell arteritis is inflammation of the arteries that can cause sudden blindness in one or both eyes.

- **Eyes - retinitis pigmentosa**
  Retinitis pigmentosa is the collective name for a range of diseases that damage the retina and cause vision to fade.

Home

Related information on other websites

- **Royal National Institute of Blind People UK**

Support Groups

- **Charles Bonnet Syndrome Foundation**

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Page last reviewed: 25 Nov 2012

