

THE CHARLES BONNET SYNDROME When Hallucinations are normal.

The Charles Bonnet Syndrome (CBS) occurs when a person's sight is compromised through eye disease – such as macular degeneration, cataracts, diabetic retinopathy or other eye disorders. The symptoms of CBS do not affect everyone with low vision and, as yet, it is not possible to predict who will develop the condition – or why.

Everyone whose sight is deteriorating should be warned of the possibility that visual disturbances might become part of his or her life. These appear in all sorts of forms – from simple lines and dots, coloured blobs and geometrical patterns to more complex hallucinations of faces (sometimes distorted or gargoyle-like), people (young or old) often in period costume or whole scenes.

It is important to remember that these hallucinations use only one of the five senses – sight. If any of the others – hearing, tasting, smelling or touching – is involved, then it is not CBS.

Dr. Dominic ffytche – the UK's lead researcher into CBS – explains what happens in the brain to cause the visual disturbances. "From the moment we open our eyes, the nerve cells in the retina send a constant stream of impulses along the visual pathways, which are passed to the visual parts of the brain. If the retina is damaged, or even if you blindfold your eyes, this stream of impulses reduces. Paradoxically, the response of the brain is not to reduce but, rather, increase the cells firing – and it is this increase that causes visual hallucinations. What you hallucinate depends on where the increase is located. If it is in the brain area specialised for colour, then you hallucinate a colour; if in the brain area specialised for faces, then you see a face – and so on."

As yet, there is no "magic treatment" but, for some people, certain types of medication can help. Other people find they can stop a hallucination, while it is occurring, by blinking, moving their eyes from side to side, changing the lighting in the room, standing up/sitting down – whatever it takes to shunt their brains into another gear and make the current hallucination disappear.

Whilst CBS can be alarming for the person, it should not be confused with a mental condition of any kind. Unfortunately, too many people are unaware of CBS and – because of the nature of the symptoms – hesitate to tell family and friends or their GP.

If you think you might be suffering from CBS, please stop hesitating and consult your GP.

We are working hard to raise awareness of CBS, but we suggest you take this leaflet with you – just in case your GP has yet to encounter the condition.

Other links include: The Macular Society website.