

Seeing Things That Are Not There

Patient information leaflet

Charles Bonnet syndrome

Some people whose sight has reduced begin to see things that are not there. Patterns, shapes, brickwork or lattice; sometimes faces, figures, children or animals; sometimes whole scenes. They can appear suddenly, last seconds or much longer, and come and go over weeks or months.

This is called Charles Bonnet syndrome. **It is not a mental illness. It is not dementia. It is not a sign that you are losing your mind.** It is a recognised and well-understood consequence of reduced sight, and it is common — far more common than the number of people who mention it.

Why it happens

The brain is used to receiving a constant stream of visual information. When that stream is reduced, the visual part of the brain does not simply fall silent; it generates images of its own. It is closer to the phantom sensation that people feel after losing a limb than to anything psychiatric.

How you can tell it apart

- You know the images are not real, even while you are seeing them.
- They are purely visual — you do not hear, smell or feel anything alongside them.
- They do not speak to you or ask anything of you.
- They are often oddly out of scale, or dressed in a way that makes no sense in the room.

If what you experience is different from this — particularly if you hear voices, or feel the images have meaning or intention — please tell me, because that needs looking at separately.

Most people say nothing

Many people live with this for years without telling anyone, including their family and their doctor, for fear of how it will be understood. Please do mention it. It changes nothing about your eye treatment, but it means I can tell you plainly what it is, and that alone is what most people need.

What can help while it is happening

- Changing the lighting — the images are often more active in dim rooms, and sometimes in very bright ones
- Blinking firmly, or moving your eyes from side to side without moving your head
- Looking away and changing what you are doing, or moving to another room
- Company and conversation; the images are usually less active when you are occupied
- Rest — they tend to be worse when you are tired or unwell

Will it stop

For most people it becomes less frequent over months to a year or two, particularly once the brain has adjusted to the change in sight. Anything that improves your vision, including better lighting and magnifiers, tends to reduce it as well.

Reviewed by Dr. Aysun Yucel Gencoglu, MD, FEBO, FICO.

Notes for you from today's consultation

