Medically Unexplained Visual Symptoms – The Eyes are The Mind

Paediatric Ophthalmology information for parents)

Children often experience problems with their eyes or vision, the cause of which can be difficult to explain. Typical problems include blurred vision, tunnel vision, double vision, black and white vision, or seeing coloured lights or shapes.

Frequently, these symptoms start when children are worried or anxious about something – for example, other children at school, a difficult time at home, exam stress, or similar events. Sometimes there might not be a particular reason that you can link to your child's symptoms.

How will my child be assessed?

In the children's eye clinic, your child may be assessed by a range of professionals including nurses, orthoptists (who assess vision and eye movements), optometrists (who carry out tests for glasses) and ophthalmologists (eye doctors).

Sometimes, children who complain of blurred vision actually have normal vision after assessment, which can be reassuring for the child and family to hear. If the examination is normal, it is very likely that there is no serious cause or disease, and most children will not need other tests.

What other tests might be needed?

A few children might need specialised tests such as a scan of the back of the eye (OCT) or electrodiagnostic tests, which check whether the retina (the nerve layer at the back of the eye) and the optic nerve (the nerve which takes the visual information from the eye to the brain) are working normally. Sometimes an MRI scan of your child's eyes and brain might be needed.

If the assessment is normal, a diagnosis of 'medically unexplained visual symptoms' is made. The doctor will explain to you and your child that there is no physical cause for your child's problem with their eyes or vision and that, for unknown reasons, their mind is not processing the visual information as well as it should. Sometimes the doctor will ask about any worries at home or school.

How long will it take for these symptoms to go away?

These problems usually get better on their own. This generally happens within a few weeks, but sometimes can take a shorter or much longer period of time. Rarely, the problem can persist, but, if families feel confident that there is no serious physical problem, then they can provide reassurance to their child, so they can 'move on' and put their eye problems aside. This is just as you might deal with the occasional unexplained tummy ache or headache.

What about follow up?

We usually see your child again, to reassure everyone that the symptoms have settled, or to check that we can demonstrate that the vision can be seen to be normal (even though your child may still have symptoms).

What if my child develops other (non-visual) symptoms?

Very rarely, children can also develop other symptoms, such as numbness or difficulties with walking. These may require an assessment by a paediatrician (children's doctor) to make sure that there are no other causes for these problems. If this assessment is normal, then a diagnosis of 'medically unexplained symptoms' will be made. The management is the same as for the visual symptoms, in that your child will need reassurance that all is well, and that they can get on with their usual activities.

Is there anything else I should be aware of?

Sometimes, children complain of physical symptoms when they are anxious or depressed, or are having difficulties with their learning or attention span. Rarely, a psychologist or sometimes a psychiatrist might be helpful in working out if there is an emotional issue involved in your child's medically unexplained visual symptoms. You can discuss this possibility in clinic with the doctor or with your GP.

Contact details:

Appointments: 01803 656350

Orthoptics Mon-Thur: 01803 655337

Orthoptics Friday: 01803 655122

Ophthalmologist's Sec: 01803 655141

For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.

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