How Common is Kaleidoscopic Vision in People With MS?

by ERICA WILSON

Kaleidoscope Vision and Multiple Sclerosis

Multiple sclerosis (MS) disrupts life in so many ways. You can experience mobility issues, myriad sensory changes and visual disturbances, to name a few. The most common of these is the visual change.

Many report symptoms, such as double or blurry vision. Still, others report the complete loss of vision. They can appear as symptoms before diagnosis, or they can occur in later stages of MS. The disturbances usually occur on one side at a time, which is a hallmark of MS with any symptom.

For instance, when my MS flares, my left side is usually the side that is affected. The everyday numbness and mild pain I experience is intensified, but just on that side; such a strange bird MS is.

There are a few types of visual changes with multiple sclerosis, but today, we will focus on one called kaleidoscope vision.

What is Kaleidoscope Vision?

Do you remember the toy called the kaleidoscope? It was a cylindrical tube that you looked through to see these beautifully-colored shapes that resembled broken glass. When you turned the bottom of it, the shapes and colors moved to make a different picture. They were the coolest toys!

As cool as it may seem to see rainbows randomly, and have beautiful broken glass images in your head, seeing this without the toy is cause for concern.

What Causes Kaleidoscope Vision?

Aptly named, kaleidoscope vision usually occurs as an aura, or precursor to a migraine, although the use of hallucinogenic drugs can produce kaleidoscope vision as well. The images you see are distorted, colorful and broken, sometimes shiny and may move. Incidentally, individuals with MS experience migraines three times more often, and possibly even differently than someone without MS. Two types of migraines can cause kaleidoscope vision.

- Visual (ocular) migraine happens when the nerve cells in your brain begin to misfire, sending discombobulated signals to your eyes. These generally last from 10 minutes to 30 minutes.
- Retinal migraine is more serious as it is a result of loss of blood flow to the eye. You may experience a blind spot, or in some cases total blindness, but only in one eye.

Even more serious causes of kaleidoscope vision may include stroke, brain injury, or damage to the retina. If you are unsure about the cause, please contact your physician or go to the nearest emergency department, especially if you are experiencing it for the first time.

How Do I Know if it is More Than a Migraine?

There are some symptoms you can look for that may signal a more serious cause of kaleidoscope vision than a migraine.

- Most, if not everyone at some point, experience floaters in our line of vision. Mine are usually peripheral. I cannot count the times I have turned suddenly because the shadow of a floater suddenly appears. When they are enormous and are accompanied by flashes of light or blind spots, it is time to seek medical attention.
- Tunnel vision or blindness on one side.
- Any change in your migraine such as length of time and pain intensity.

If you experience these or any other new symptoms, see an ophthalmologist or another eye specialist as soon as possible.

Is There Anything You Can Do About It?

As far as I can tell from my research, there are no over-the-counter treatments for kaleidoscope vision. Since it generally only lasts a few minutes, you may have to wait it out. While some occurrences of kaleidoscope vision are an aura before a migraine, this is only one type you can experience. Nausea, dizziness, vomiting, sensitivity to light and other symptoms are commonly felt right before or during migraine.

I used to get migraines regularly. I do not remember ever experiencing kaleidoscope vision or any of the other symptoms, but when I did have an aura, it was a freezing feeling that started at the nape of my neck and slowly migrated to the front of my head. Also, I would feel this sometimes an hour before, other times days before the migraine would rear its ugly head. I prepared for the pain by taking an over-the-counter medicine specially formulated for migraine pain, or I would rest.

Sometimes, if you are lucky enough, you will experience the aura without it ending in migraine pain. This is also known as silent migraine. In this case, rest is your best option, preferably in a dark room with a fan running to keep the pain away.

The Takeaway

If you are experiencing the kaleidoscope vision phenomenon or any other aura for the first time, please seek medical attention. Kaleidoscope vision can also be a sign of something much more serious than migraine and should be handled by a medical professional.