

## Vision loss - adapting to life with vision impairment

Vision loss can change your life dramatically. Everyday activities may become difficult or impossible. There are many types of vision impairment and each has a different effect on a person's ability to see and on their mobility.

Support and advice is available to help people who are blind or have vision loss live independently and adapt to life with vision impairment. For many people, there is no need to give up activities they enjoy.

Vision loss can affect people of all ages, but approximately two-thirds of those who are vision impaired are over the age of 65. Some vision loss can be prevented, while other conditions may be hereditary or develop as people age. About six per cent of people in Australia with vision impairment are totally blind.

### Types of vision loss

The major causes and effects of vision impairment are:

- **Age-related macular degeneration** – causes distortion or loss of central vision in older people, resulting in difficulties with activities such as reading and recognising faces.
- **Diabetic retinopathy** – symptoms include blurring and patchiness in vision. The underlying cause is diabetes.
- **Glaucoma** – this causes tunnel vision and affects safe mobility and driving.
- **Cataracts** – these cause blurring of vision and increased sensitivity to glare, but can be corrected by surgery.
- **Refractive error** – half of all vision impairment in Australia is due to under-corrected refractive error. The types of refractive error include long-sightedness, short-sightedness, astigmatism and presbyopia. Refractive error can be addressed with the provision of glasses.
- **Children** – there many diseases, defects, malformations, infections and disorders that can affect the visual system in infants. Vision is a primary avenue for learning in infants. Vision impairment could influence the normal development of body control, hand use, language and social behaviours.

### Tips for maintaining your independence

There are many types of vision impairment and each has a different impact on a person's ability to see, their confidence in getting around safely and their mobility. However, there are things you can do to help maintain your independence and quality of life. These following suggestions can be applied to wide a range of activities.

#### **Bigger - enlarge and magnify**

It may help if you enlarge or magnify things you are looking at. For example:

- Use large print personal diaries and phone books.
- Use a photocopier to enlarge recipes, music notes and other information.
- Move closer to the object you are looking at (for example, the television).
- Enlarge the type size (font) on your computer screen.
- Update your prescription glasses, for your best possible vision.
- Use hand-held or mounted magnifiers to help with reading and sewing. These should be prescribed for the type and degree of vision impairment.
- Use telephones with large buttons.

### **Bolder - use contrast**

Contrast can help you see things more clearly. Black-on-white or white-on-black produces the best contrast. Use contrast to help in everyday activities. For example:

- Use black felt-tip, water-based pens to maximise your ability to read.
- Put contrasting coloured strips on the edge of steps and cupboards – on dark surfaces, these can be a light shade such as white or yellow.
- Pour dark liquids into white cups and light liquids into dark cups.
- Paint the insides of cupboards white to maximise the brightness and contrast so that items are easier to find.
- Use plain dark tablecloths or mats with white crockery.

### **Brighter - improve close lighting**

Improving both general and focal/task lighting can make objects and printed material easier to see.

## **Use other senses to supplement your vision**

Use your other senses to help supplement your vision. For example:

- **Touch** – add tactile markings to appliances, such as stoves and washing machines, to indicate off and on settings. Commonly used switches and settings can be marked so they are easy to distinguish from others.
- **Hearing** – use talking and audible devices, such as clocks and kitchen scales.
- **Taste** – use your sense of taste to tell the difference between different foods, herbs and spices.
- **Smell** – you can check for freshness of fruit, vegetables or other foods and check if food is cooked or burning.

It may take time to learn to trust your other senses. Give yourself time to practise and to build up your confidence in new ways of doing things.

## **Be organised**

Some tips include:

- Eliminate unnecessary clutter around the home.
- Keep items in their place.
- Allow extra time to orient yourself and move around unfamiliar spaces.

## **Getting out and about**

Having vision loss need not mean staying at home. If you have lost the confidence to use public transport or even go to the local shops, you can receive support and training from an Orientation and Mobility Specialist to assist you to get about safely and confidently. A guide dog may be the answer – they are specially bred and trained to enable people who are blind or vision impaired to achieve freedom, mobility and independence.

Recreation is important for an enjoyable and active life. There are a variety of organised sports for people with vision loss – such as bowling, golf, tandem cycling, cricket and rowing – as well as opportunities to travel in Australia and overseas. These activities may require the assistance of family and friends or the use of modified equipment.

## **Technology can assist**

Technology allows people with vision loss to access information that was previously confined to the printed word. A range of assisted technologies are available. Computers can be an important information source. People of all ages use screen readers to translate words on a computer screen into large print or the spoken word.

## **Help is available**

Support and advice is available to help people with vision loss to maintain their independence. The kind of support available includes:

- Training in the use of different mobility devices, such as a white cane, or in living with a guide dog. This helps people to move about safely and confidently within the community.
- Advice on special devices such as large print and touch markers. These allow people to use appliances like washing machines and ovens more easily and safely.
- Radio stations for people who are unable to read the standard printed word. RPH Print Radio stations read out newspapers, magazines and books on-air as well as providing other specialist programs of interest.
- Libraries of books, recipes and government information available in large print, cassette, braille or CD format.
- An extensive range of equipment to help people with vision impairment in their everyday lives – for example needle threaders, talking watches and clocks, coin and note holders.
- For people with some vision, there is a growing range of videos that include descriptions of the visual information when there are gaps in the dialogue.
- Low vision clinics offer spectacles, magnifiers, telescopes and other devices that can enhance remaining vision.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Eye care practitioner (ophthalmologist, optometrist or orthoptist)
- Occupational therapist
- Vision Australia , and Low Vision Services Tel. 1300 84 74 66
- Blind Citizens Australia Tel. (03) 9654 1400 or 1800 033 660
- Guide Dogs Victoria Tel. (03) 9854 4444 or 1800 804 805
- Seeing Eye Dogs Australia (03) 9381 6400

## Things to remember

- There are many types of vision impairment and each has a different effect on a person's ability to see and on their mobility.
- Losing your vision can change your life dramatically and everyday activities may become difficult or impossible.
- Vision loss will often mean you need to change the way you do things.
- Support and advice is available for people who have lost their vision.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Vision Australia

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