

Vision loss - sport

Many people aged 70 or over will experience significant vision loss as a natural consequence of ageing. This gradual loss of vision may prevent some people from enjoying their usual sporting activities. A sedentary house-bound person can experience a variety of problems, such as overweight and obesity, mobility difficulties and loneliness. However, many sports can be adapted to suit people who are blind or have low vision, and the following is just a small sample.

Sighted people can help

People who are blind or have low vision may need help to fully enjoy sporting activities. Sighted people can assist in a number of ways, including:

- Organising transport to and from the venue
- Setting up the equipment
- Advising on distances, direction and obstacles
- Assisting the person who is blind or has low vision to master the key moves of an unfamiliar sport
- Asking how they can best help the person who is blind or has low vision.

Examples of suitable sports

Bicycle riding

A tandem bicycle has two seats. The sighted person sits up front and steers, while the person who is blind or has low vision sits on the back and helps to pedal. The sighted person can give a commentary and advise the other person of hills, turns and braking.

Blind cricket

Blind cricket involves modified rules and equipment, such as:

- A cane ball filled with lead and bottle tops to make noise
- Metal stumps to make an audible sound when the ball strikes
- A smaller field, so that fielders can hear the ball
- Underarm bowling
- Only one batsman at a time, to eliminate the chance of collisions
- Runners for completely blind batsmen
- Even numbers of players who are blind, sighted or have low vision on each team.

Golf

A person with vision loss needs a sighted player to help them. Adaptations to normal golf include:

- Coloured balls are used.
- The sighted person advises on bunkers, flags, club selection, direction, distance and judgement.
- The sighted person stands next to the hole to give the player who is blind or has low vision a larger target.
- Rules for blind golf allow the player to ground the club in a bunker.

Horse riding

Experienced horses at riding schools generally know their own way around the course and don't have to be steered by riders. This means that people who are blind or have low vision may not need as much assistance from sighted people as for other sports. Suggestions include:

- Talk the person who is blind or has low vision through the course first.
- Teach them how to sit properly and hold the reins.
- Instruct them on how to direct the horse, such as stopping or turning.
- Tell the person who is blind or has low vision about upcoming obstacles.
- Look out for and warn the person who is blind or has low vision of low branches.

Karate and other self-defence disciplines

Most people who are blind or have low vision find that their sense of balance improves after a few months of practising karate or some other self-defence discipline. One-on-one tuition until the person masters the basics is usually required.

Lawn bowls

Lawn bowls is a popular sport among people who are blind or have low vision. There are national and international competitions. Adaptations to normal bowls include:

- Footer mats are used to help with orientation and direction.
- A sighted person calls out the distance and the location of the jack.
- A person standing behind the jack gives the person who is blind or has low vision a larger target.

Swimming

Individual instruction is best at first, but experienced swimmers can orient themselves in the pool if there are roped lanes. Apart from swimming, other activities for the pool include:

- Water aerobics
- Walking races
- Beach-ball soccer, using the hands.

Tennis

Tennis is slowly gaining popularity among people with vision loss. Adjustments to the normal game include:

- A lightweight and large 'Gator skin' ball is used – this is coloured white or bright yellow.
- Indoor courts are preferable because of the lightweight ball.
- Serves are made underarm from the serving line.
- Two bounces are allowed instead of one.

Walking

Sighted people can help people who are blind or have low vision to enjoy a neighbourhood or bush walk:

- There should be a ratio of one sighted person for each totally blind person.
- Choose locations close to public transport.
- Use defined and easy-to-follow tracks.
- Pick spots where guide dogs can be taken off the leash and allowed to run around.
- Warn of upcoming obstacles.
- Offer an arm to help guide the person if they wish.

See your doctor first

If you have a pre-existing medical condition, are overweight, are over 40 years of age or haven't exercised regularly for a long time, check with your doctor before starting any type of exercise program.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your vision specialist
- Vision loss organisations
- Vision Australia , and Low Vision Services Tel. 1300 84 74 66

- Blind Sports Victoria Tel. (03) 9822 8876

Things to remember

- A sedentary, house-bound person can experience a variety of problems, such as overweight and obesity, mobility difficulties and loneliness.
- Many sports can be adapted to suit people who are blind or have low vision.
- Sighted people can help those who are blind or have low vision to enjoy sporting activities.

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

Vision Australia

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