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## Vision loss - living with a guide dog

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### Summary

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Guide dogs are specially bred and trained to enable people who are blind or vision impaired to regain their independence. However, some people who would benefit from using a guide dog shy away from the idea because they (or their family members) can't imagine what it would be like to live with a guide dog.

One reason for the hesitation could be that the relationship between the guide dog and its handler may not be fully understood. For example, a British study has found that 92 per cent of respondents believe that the dog, not the handler, decides when to cross the road. This is not true. To imagine what life would be like, the prospective handler needs to understand the reality of the relationship they would have with a guide dog.

### Common misconceptions about guide dogs

There are many misconceptions about guide dogs and their relationship with their handlers. Some of the myths (and the real story) include:

- **The guide dog's life is all work and no play** – guide dogs are only working when they're wearing the harness. At other times, they interact with the family like any other pet dog.
- **It's cruel to force a dog to work** – guide dogs are intelligent animals that thrive on the challenge of helping their handlers. Those dogs that aren't suited to the work are identified and removed from the program before training begins through an extensive assessment and selection process.
- **Guide dogs are stressed by the work and responsibility** – guide dogs enjoy their work. There is no evidence that guide dogs experience any more stress than ordinary non-working dogs. Those dogs that would find the work stressful are identified and removed from the program before or during training.
- **The guide dog isn't loved like an ordinary pet** – guide dogs are loved members of the family like any other pet. The handler and their guide dog enjoy a deep bond built on companionship, loyalty and trust. Other family members can also enjoy a close relationship with the guide dog.
- **The guide dog is in charge** – it is the handler, not the guide dog, who makes decisions such as when to cross the road.
- **The handler is in charge** – the guide dog is trained in what's known as selective disobedience. For example, the guide dog will disobey a command if they spot a hazard their companion has not heard, such as an approaching car.

### Choosing your guide dog

Since handlers and guide dogs work as a close-knit team, care is taken to ensure compatibility. In Victoria, trained guide dogs are also assessed by their temperament and personality, in order to better match them with suitable handlers.

Factors to consider include:

- the prospective handler's height, weight and strength.
- the handler's temperament and personality, and that of other members of their household.
- the handler's energy levels – for example, whether they live a sedentary or busy lifestyle.
- the environment – for example, quiet rural area or busy city, large property or small apartment, and so on.

### Training for the handler

In Victoria, the new handler completes one month of intensive training with their guide dog. Skills to be learned by

the handler include:

- Learning the known commands so they can communicate their wishes to the dog.
- Getting used to interpreting the dog's movements. For example, the handler needs to recognise when the dog is turning or approaching stairs.
- Practice working with the guide dog in a range of situations where a trained guide dog instructor is close by. This helps to build confidence and ensure correct handling. Over the training period, the complexity of situations gradually increases and includes travel in both residential and city areas, on public transport, and travel after dark.
- Building a relationship. The handler and their guide dog spend time getting to know one another. This also helps the guide dog make the transition from obeying the instructor to obeying the handler.

### **Guide dogs at work**

The guide dog enjoys its work and is motivated to work well by the leadership and love it receives from its handler. Guide dogs are trained to ignore distractions such as other dogs or the well-meaning attentions of other people. The dog shows a different attitude when wearing its harness – its movements are more purposeful and focused.

As well as helping its handler to negotiate the roads, low-hanging obstacles, elevators and stairs, the guide dog actually helps the handler to socialise. Sighted people don't always know what to say to a person with vision impairment for fear of causing offence – but a guide dog makes a perfect conversation point.

### **Guide dogs 'after hours'**

The guide dog isn't on duty 24 hours a day. It has been trained to recognise that work is finished once the harness is removed. That's when the guide dog is like any other pet dog. The handler (and every other family member) is free to interact and play with the guide dog as they would an ordinary pet. The guide dog needs care like any dog, which includes food, water, grooming, visits to the vet and regular exercise.

It is important to allow the guide dog some time every day to relax and enjoy being a dog. Just as overworked human beings can become stressed and anxious, guide dogs that wear the harness all the time can become tired and start behaving inappropriately.

### **Guide dog retirement can be upsetting**

Guide dogs usually work with their companion for between eight to 10 years. After working together as a close and loving team for many years, retirement can be upsetting and painful for both the dog and its handler.

Often the handler is able to keep the first dog as a pet, which can make the transition to a new guide dog easier. Immediate training with a new guide dog following the retirement of the first is not always possible and depends on the availability of another suitably matched guide dog.

### **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Guide Dogs Victoria Tel. (03) 9854 4444
- Seeing Eye Dogs Australia Tel. (03) 9381 6400

### **Things to remember**

- To imagine what life would be like, the prospective handler needs to understand the reality of the relationship they would have with a guide dog.
- Guide dogs are intelligent animals that thrive on the challenge of helping their handlers.
- Once the harness is removed, the guide dog is off duty and able to interact with the family like an ordinary family pet.

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Guide Dogs Victoria

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