

Oxfordshire Association for the Blind

**Information for volunteers working
with people with sight loss**

Oxfordshire Association for the Blind has put this information together for volunteers from other organisations who are working with people who have a visual impairment.

We hope it will increase your understanding of the different ways in which sight loss may affect someone, and give you some ideas about how you may be able to help them.

We are always happy to listen to suggestions, so if you have any ideas or comments about this information, please let us know.

And finally, if anything is unclear, or if there is anything else you would like to know, please don't hesitate to ask. You'll find contact details for OAB on the last page.

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What is visual impairment?

A person has a visual impairment if their sight loss cannot be corrected with glasses or contact lenses.

There are two main categories of visual impairment:

- sight impaired (partially sighted), where the degree of sight loss is more moderate;
- severely sight impaired (blind), where the degree of sight loss is such that activities that rely on eyesight become impossible.

When you have an eye test, two main areas are being measured:

- visual acuity – your central vision, used for looking at things in detail (reading, watching TV etc);
- visual field – the ability to see round the edge of your vision while looking straight ahead.

In England, around 360,000 people are registered as visually impaired. However, as many as 2 million in the UK may be living with some degree of sight loss. Most cases of visual impairment in this country are caused by ageing; it's estimated that around one in five people over the age of 75 have some degree of visual impairment.

However, we also need to remember that 4-5% of people who are registered as severely sight impaired (blind) have some vision, even if it is only light perception. So it's as important to focus on what they *can* do as what they can't. While some tasks may be very challenging or impossible for someone to manage alone, we should not *assume* that someone will struggle. A person who needs a long cane when out and about may have some tunnel vision and be perfectly able to sew on their own buttons. In fact, you may be surprised by how many things can be achieved by people with sight loss, perhaps using a different method from you, or just doing things more slowly.

Common conditions causing visual impairment

This section gives a very brief overview of some of the most common causes of sight loss. If you want to know more, there is good information on the RNIB website www.rnib.org.uk. However, it isn't usually necessary to have detailed knowledge of someone's eye condition; it's much more important to understand a bit about *how* an individual sees, and how it affects their life, rather than *why* their sight is affected.

Macular degeneration

A group of eye conditions caused by damage to the macular, a small area at the centre of the retina which allows us to see fine detail and colour. If it occurs later in life, it is called 'age-related macular degeneration' or AMD. In its most common form it leads to gradual loss of central vision. AMD accounts for around one third of all cases of visual impairment in the UK and although a serious condition, there is still some peripheral vision and the person affected will not go totally blind.

Glaucoma

This is usually associated with raised fluid pressure in the eye which damages the optic nerve. It can go unnoticed, as peripheral vision generally goes before central vision is affected. If untreated, it may cause blindness. Treatments include drugs, eye drops and conventional/laser surgery.

Cataract

Commonly associated with ageing, a cataract is a clouding of the lens in the eye. Surgery can remove the opaque lens, which is usually replaced by a small plastic lens. Cataracts can be dealt with as soon as they start affecting everyday life, and the vast majority of operations are successful. Most people notice an instant improvement, though complete healing can take some months.

Diabetic Retinopathy

This involves haemorrhaging of the vessels at the back of the eye and is more likely to affect people the longer they have been diagnosed with diabetes. Symptoms may include loss of field of vision, poor focus and loss of detail. Laser treatment can prevent further damage.

Charles Bonnet syndrome

It is not uncommon for people with sight problems to start seeing things which they know aren't real. Charles Bonnet syndrome (CBS) most usually affects people with serious sight loss who have lost their sight later in life; it often appears when there has been a worsening of sight. The cause is related to the brain's processing of poor information it is receiving from the eyes. People seem to experience the visual hallucinations when there is not much going

on – perhaps sitting alone quietly in a familiar place, or lying in bed. It can be very frightening. People often worry that they are ‘going mad’ or have a condition such as Alzheimer’s. Probably the best treatment is knowing that it is failing eyesight and not other health problems that cause CBS. The symptoms (which only affect sight, not hearing or any other sensations) often disappear after a year to eighteen months. While there are other medical problems that can cause people to see things, having CBS does not increase the likelihood of developing any of them. Some people find it helps to change something when they get the hallucinations – switching a light on if it’s dark, standing up/sitting down, or moving their eyes left to right/up and down.

It is important to stress that visual impairment is a deeply personal experience and two people with the same condition may experience it in completely different ways. In addition, sight may vary considerably on different days, at different times of day, or in different lighting conditions. It can also be affected by things like tiredness or stress.

A few tips on helping people with sight problems

In conversation

People with visual impairments are denied the visual cues which sighted people take for granted. So give as much verbal information as possible. For example:

- When you meet someone, use his or her name (especially if others are present, so the person knows you are talking to them).
- Sometimes a gentle touch on the arm can confirm you are addressing them.
- Don't forget to identify yourself.
- Remember to say when you are going.

Incidentally, it's fine to say things like 'See you again soon'; visually impaired people do it too.

Older people with sight difficulties, who cannot get out and about easily, may spend a lot of time on their own. Because opportunities to talk to other people may be limited, they may very much appreciate someone who will spend some time *listening* to them.

Please remember that for many people, losing their sight is experienced as a bereavement. So you may encounter anger, sadness and depression. You may feel you can't do very much, but in fact just lending a listening ear can be invaluable. If you feel the person needs professional counselling help, please contact OAB. Our Senior Sight Adviser is a qualified counsellor and is herself visually impaired.

It's also important to bear in mind that silent communication – leaning forward, nodding encouragingly – may not be picked up by someone who is visually impaired. So you need to replace visual cues with verbal cues. The odd 'Yes'/'I can imagine', or simply a gentle 'Mmm', will show that you're paying attention and engaged with the conversation.

Other things that can encourage conversation include:

- Using open-ended questions (ie questions that don't have a simple yes/no answer) such as 'how?' or 'why?'
- Asking leading questions: 'Could you tell me a bit more about that?'
- Helping the person to express their feelings: 'How do you feel about that?'
- Encouraging the person to be specific: 'What bothers you most about that?', 'Can you give me an example of what you mean?'

Always remember, it's only the person's sight that doesn't work properly – not their brain!

Helping someone with a visual impairment in their home

Here are a few practical tips:

- When you arrive at someone's house, remember it might take them a bit longer than a sighted person to get to the door. If there are no lights on, it doesn't mean there's no-one at home.
- Think about the person's sense of safety when they are inviting you into their home. When arranging the visit, you may wish to suggest they give you a password.
- When they open the door, tell them who you are, and if you are on your own.
- In the house, ask if the person wants doors left open or closed.
- If you pick something up, put it back in exactly the same place. Many blind and partially-sighted people are very organised, and manage at home partly because they know exactly where everything is.
- Don't leave anything on the floor where someone could trip over it. (We often put our bags down by the sofa without a second thought!)
- Don't leave cupboard doors, drawers etc open. This includes kitchen cupboards, which are often at head height.
- Don't forget to say when you're leaving a room.

While some practical tasks can be particularly challenging for a blind or partially-sighted person to manage alone (perhaps dealing with correspondence, sewing on buttons, writing cards or sorting a CD collection), it's very important not to *assume* that someone will struggle with a particular task. A person with tunnel vision may be perfectly able to sew, even if they use a long cane when they're out and about. In fact, you might be surprised by how many things can be achieved by someone with sight loss. They may use a different method from you, or just do things more slowly.

There are of course many things that can help people to be independent. In particular, appropriate lighting is vital and OAB can advise on suitable lamps. Colour and contrast also have an important part to play.

Making use of contrast:

A white bread sandwich is much easier to locate on a dark-coloured plate; a black chopping board is great for onions, while a light-coloured one would be better for beef or green peppers; red potatoes are easier to peel than white (you can see where you've removed the peel); dark tape round a light switch provides useful contrast against a white wall; coloured toothpaste shows up better on white bristles; floating a brightly coloured sponge in the bath makes it easier to see how high the water has reached.

Using a sense of touch:

Bump-ons are raised, brightly coloured, sticky plastic dots. They come in a variety of colours that can contrast with a background – and, being raised, they're also very easy to feel. People use them for things like marking settings such as oven temperatures or on the washing machine, and perhaps on the 'play' and 'pause' buttons on the TV remote or a CD player.

Making things bigger:

Many things are made larger for people with impaired sight eg telephones with big buttons, clocks with big faces, playing cards and Scrabble pieces.

Audible noise:

There are talking versions of many things, from watches and clocks, to kitchen scales and microwaves, to computer software.

All the equipment described here is available from OAB. Please phone if you would like an equipment guide with more information. The guide is also available at www.oxeyes.org.uk

A really common difficulty for people with sight loss is identifying what's in their kitchen cupboards and fridge. It's obviously very important that people don't end up eating out-of-date food, and there are lots of little tricks people develop to get round this problem. They include elastic bands round tins (one for baked beans, two for tuna etc, or just differentiate savoury and sweet); stick on their own label, with the contents written very large; talking tins (record the contents and attach the device to the lid); coloured freezer bags (eg meat=red, veg=green).

A tip: if you're writing for someone with sight loss, use a clear font such as Arial or Verdana in at least 16pt – or for handwriting, a thick felt tip.

A few ideas for useful services and gadgets around the home

- The Penfriend (around £55 from RNIB) is a helpful little gadget for creating audio labels. You record eg the contents of a tin or an event in your diary, and just touch the label with the pen to hear it read back to you.
- A useful gadget in the kitchen is the liquid level indicator, for making hot drinks safely. It has prongs so you can hook it over the side of the mug. When the liquid touches the prongs, the gadget buzzes and vibrates, warning you to stop pouring.
- For many people, one of the most difficult consequences of sight loss is losing the ability to read. Luckily, it is possible to get a huge range of books and newspapers in an audio format – on CD, memory stick or as a download to your computer, smartphone or other device. For more information, contact OAB or check the RNIB or Calibre Audiobooks websites.
- Many people benefit from audio description on the television. (A digital TV is required.) This is a commentary that describes the visual aspects of a film or TV programme (what the characters are doing, but also body language, facial expressions and visual jokes), without talking over the dialogue. Broadcasters (BBC, Channel 4, Sky etc) are obliged to add audio description to 20 per cent of their programmes. The service is free, and is accessed through Freeview, satellite or cable.

Out and about

Many visually-impaired people are elderly – by the age of 75, one in five of us is living with sight loss, and by the time we are 90, it's one in two. So an inability to see well is often combined with other conditions associated with ageing, including mobility problems, and means that many older people with sight loss stop going out on their own.

If you visit someone in their own home, it's easy to be fooled by how easily they seem to get around. This ease is born of familiarity, routine and control – and these recede rapidly with every step away from home. Taking someone's arm, or even just having a companion who can point out obstacles, help cross roads etc, can give someone a huge confidence boost when out and about.

Canes, sticks and dogs

Long white cane:

This requires training by a qualified rehabilitation officer, which includes learning routes a person commonly takes. Once learned, it's a very effective method of getting around. You sweep the cane in front of you to detect different surfaces, changes in level such as kerbs and steps, and landmarks such as manhole covers. The scanning takes the form of sweeping the cane in an arc from one side to the other to just beyond the width of the body. The cane isn't designed to take any weight.

Symbol cane:

If someone has a bit more vision, they may use a symbol cane. It's simply intended to indicate that the person has a visual impairment. It's useful, for example, when crossing roads (motorists take more care) and can save a lot of explaining in places like shops (why you need help finding something or reading a price).

White walking stick:

This will be used by someone who has a visual impairment and also mobility problems.

Dual impairment:

A white cane or stick with a red or orange band around shows that the person also has a hearing impairment.

Guide dogs:

When a guide dog has its harness on, it's working, so don't pet it. Guide dogs shouldn't be fed anything without the owner's permission (their diet is strictly regulated). Incidentally, guide dogs may be highly-trained, but they don't know when it's safe to cross a street, how to read traffic lights, or how to find an unfamiliar location. It is the handler's responsibility to give the dog clear directions and commands in order to direct their travels, including deciding when it's safe to cross (determined by listening to traffic and other clues). The dog navigates obstacles in their paths and gets them to their destination safely.

Sighted guiding

On the next page, you'll find information about sighted guiding. This is when a sighted person walks with, and guides, someone with a visual impairment. As a general rule:

- Always let the blind person hold *your* arm. Just above the elbow is best practice, but older people sometimes prefer to link their arm through yours.
- Always maintain physical contact with the person you are guiding – but if you have to leave them for any reason, make sure they are within touching distance of something like a chair or even a wall, and tell them what they are touching.
- Tell someone about changes in surface (eg grass to road).
- Let them know when you are approaching stairs, slopes or kerbs. Remember to say whether the stairs go up or down!

Please remember, if someone needs your help as a guide, *offer* an arm and *never, ever* grab.

Food and drink

- If you are in a café or restaurant with a visually-impaired person, remember to tell them when food and drink arrives, and when it is taken away.
- Don't over-fill drinks. Tell the person where their drink is.
- Some foods are more fiddly than others. It can be a real pain chasing peas around a plate; a sandwich is easier to handle.
- If appropriate, offer to read out the menu.
- Some people who don't see well like to have a description of where their food is on the plate eg 'chips on the left, fish on the right'. Some use the clock-face to explain eg 'chips at nine o'clock, fish at three o'clock'.

Equipment and daily living aids

This page is intended to give you just a taster of some of the ways in which adapted or specialist equipment and gadgets can make life easier for someone with sight loss, and help them retain their independence. These are some of the most popular items at OAB:

Lamps. Good lighting can make a huge difference and is very important. OAB and other specialist organisations all sell suitable LED and daylight lamps.

Clocks and watches. It can be infuriating not to know what time it is. For people with enough sight, a clock or watch with a larger-than-usual face may do the trick. Otherwise, there are talking watches and clocks – the time at the touch of a button.

Bump-ons. Brilliant! They are tactile 'buttons' that stick onto any smooth surface - so you can use your fingers rather than your eyes to find the right button on your remote control, identify the most useful programme on your washing machine, set the oven to the right temperature setting, or find buttons on your CD player.

Liquid level indicator. A great gadget for a tea addict. It makes a noise and vibrates when the liquid in your mug reaches a certain level. No more worries about spilling boiling water everywhere.

Diaries and calendars. Many people who can't see 'normal' print can use one of these. The type is large and black, and you can write on them in heavy black felt tip – much easier to see than a ballpoint.

And a few more ideas:

Telephones with big buttons make dialling much easier

Magnifiers come in a range from simple hand-held to sophisticated electronic

Playing cards, Scrabble, dice and jigsaws, adapted for use by people with low or no vision

Specialist software means even people with no vision at all can use a computer

Keyboard overlays and large-key computer keyboards can help too

Sudoku and crosswords come in large print versions

Measuring jugs, scales and microwaves all come in talking versions

Kitchen timers are made in extra extra large – as are **TV remote controls**

Introducing OAB

- OAB was founded in 1877 and is the principle charity in Oxfordshire supporting adults and children who are living with sight loss, and their carers.
- The OAB resource centre stocks a range of daily living aids, from talking watches to daylight lamps, and large-print diaries to electronic magnifiers. Visually impaired people and their carers can come and look round, and get information and advice on equipment that might help them. The centre also has optical, electronic and closed circuit TV magnifiers and visitors can view specialist computer software and peripherals.
- There is an IT suite for computer training for people with visual impairments, and a demonstration kitchen fitted with a range of gadgets and aids for training in kitchen skills.
- Staff and volunteers staff a Sight Advisory Desk at the Oxford Eye Hospital, where OAB works closely with doctors, ophthalmologists and other staff. This offers information and support to patients, particularly those facing bad news about their sight for the first time.
- OAB provides a specialist counselling service.
- Home Safety Checks are carried out on behalf of Social and Community Services.
- OAB is the local agent for the British Wireless for the Blind Fund.
- OAB has a telephone information line. There is a quarterly newsletter and a booklet 'Services for visually impaired people in Oxfordshire and beyond'. Information is also available at www.oxeyes.org.uk
- A home visiting scheme in the Oxford and Abingdon areas offers companionship and practical help to people at home. This scheme relies on volunteers, who partner clients and build relationships that in some cases last for years.
- A team of volunteers makes visits to visually-impaired computer-users at home to make adaptations to their computers.
- There are groups across Oxfordshire where visually impaired people can get together socially.

To summarise. . . If the person you assist has a visual impairment, they may be able to:

- Telephone OAB for information about any aspect of visual impairment
- Receive a quarterly newsletter in large print or audio format
- Visit the resource centre to look at specialist equipment and get advice
- Receive computer training at OAB
- Request a visit from a volunteer to adapt their computer if it is becoming difficult to see what is on the screen
- Receive training in kitchen skills at OAB
- Request specialist counselling (usually by telephone though home visits are sometimes possible)
- Get a free radio/CD player (if they are on a means-tested benefit)
- Join a local social group

Want to know more?

If you would like more information about helping people with visual impairments, please contact Ana Novakovic, Development Worker, Oxfordshire Association for the Blind at development@oxeyes.org.uk or phone 01865 725595.

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