

Information & Advice

Helping you to help yourself

# Better Sight



Help the Aged



Supported by

The Outside Clinic



This leaflet was written in association with the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB).

This leaflet was printed in September 2005. Every effort has been made to ensure that the information contained in this leaflet is correct. However, things do change, so it is always a good idea to seek expert advice on your personal situation.

If you would like this leaflet in another format, such as large print or audio tape, please contact the Information Resources Team on **020 7278 1114**.

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**As we grow older, our sight tends to change naturally, so that almost everyone over the age of 65 needs to wear glasses. Regular eye tests and suitable glasses will increase the chances of your sight remaining good. Unfortunately, some people's sight will continue to get worse so that they have difficulty seeing even with glasses. But if you get the right help and advice, worsening sight shouldn't stop you from leading a full and independent life.**

## **Eye tests**

An eye test is not just a 'glasses' test: it is a vital check on the health of your eyes. Eye diseases can often be detected at an early stage, usually before you have even noticed anything is wrong. This is very important as early treatment may stop the eye disease getting any worse and prevent the damage it would cause to your vision.

**It is therefore recommended that you have an eye test at least every two years, and more often if you notice any change in your vision.**

## Where to have an eye test

**Optometrists**, who are often called opticians or ophthalmic opticians, usually carry out eye tests.

There is an optical practice in most high streets. But you can ask to have your eyes tested at home if you are housebound, or find it hard to get out because of illness or disability. If you have difficulty finding an optometrist, or need one who will visit you at home, ask your doctor for advice or contact:

- NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 if you live in England and Wales;
- NHS Helpline on 0800 22 44 88 if you live in Scotland; **or**
- your health and social services board if you live in Northern Ireland (look in your phonebook under 'health').

For more information on what to expect from a thorough eye test, RNIB produces a useful factsheet called 'Getting an eye test'.

## Paying for eye tests

**If you are aged 60 or over you can have a free NHS eye test at any optical practice. If you need an NHS home visit, this should be free as well.** Take along something which proves your age

and fill out the form which the optometrist will give you.

If you are under 60 you will usually have to pay for your eye test, but there are some exceptions. For more details, contact the RNIB helpline and ask for the Welfare Rights Service.

## **Further eye checks and treatment**

If your eye test reveals any condition that needs treatment or further investigation, you will probably be referred to your doctor. If necessary, your doctor can then arrange for you to see an eye specialist (ophthalmologist) in a hospital.

It is important to see your doctor regularly for a general health check as other conditions and medicines can affect your sight.

## **Glasses and contact lenses**

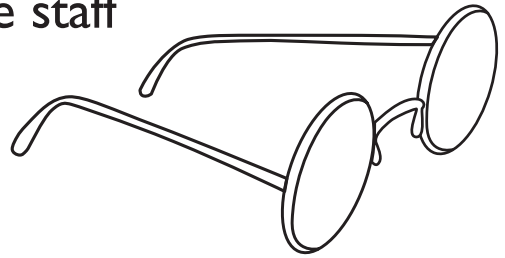
Glasses and contact lenses will enable you to see as well as possible and may help you to overcome your sight problems.

## **Where to buy glasses and contact lenses**

If your eye test indicates that you need glasses, the

optometrist is legally obliged to give you a prescription. This will detail the type and strength of lenses you need. You can take this prescription and use it to buy glasses or contact lenses from any supplier. You do not have to buy them in the practice where you had your eye test. Some glasses are expensive so it can be important to shop around.

Wherever you buy your glasses, the staff should make sure that your glasses fit and have the correct lenses to reduce your sight problems.



## **Different types of glasses and contact lenses**

An optometrist can help you make the most of your sight by advising you on the most suitable lenses for your needs. There is a wide choice of different lenses – bifocals, trifocals, and varifocals – which can help you see in different situations. Lenses may be tinted to cut down on glare. An optometrist or a dispensing optician can also advise on lighter lenses and frames as well as the different types of contact lenses available.

Whatever glasses you choose, it is important to remember to keep them clean. When you are not using them, keep them in a protective case or cover to avoid scratches. Scratched lenses increase the problem of

glare and can reduce clear vision. Never place glasses with the front of the lenses face down on a surface.

## Help with the cost of glasses and contact lenses

Some people are entitled to an **NHS voucher** to help pay for glasses or contact lenses. You are entitled to a voucher if:

- you or your partner receive the guarantee credit part of Pension Credit, Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance or, in some circumstances, Child Tax Credit or Working Tax Credit; **or**
- you have been prescribed complex lenses; **or**
- you receive a War Disablement Pension and you need your glasses because of the medical conditions you are paid the pension for (for more details on how to use the voucher under the War Pensions scheme call the Veterans Agency on 0800 169 2277).

You can get a voucher in a number of circumstances. For example, when you first need to start wearing glasses, when your prescription changes or when your current glasses have worn out through general wear and tear. The value of the voucher depends on the



kind of glasses you need and can be used at any optical practice. It should be enough to cover the full price, but if it isn't enough for the glasses you want you will have to make up the difference yourself.

If you have an HC2 or an HC3 certificate from the **NHS Low Income Scheme**, ask your optometrist about your entitlement to a voucher. To find out more about this scheme or the vouchers, ask your optometrist for leaflet HC11 'Help with health costs'. For further advice ring the Help the Aged free advice line SeniorLine on 0808 800 6565, or call the RNIB helpline and ask for the Welfare Rights Service.

## Ready-made glasses

You can buy ready-made reading glasses from a number of outlets including supermarkets. However, these should only be used as a temporary, short-term solution as it is rare for both your eyes to need exactly the same amount of magnification. Using ready-made glasses is unlikely to harm your sight, but can sometimes cause eye strain and headaches.

**It is therefore recommended that you have an eye test to check the health of your eyes and to find out which glasses are right for you.**

## Lighting

Compared with the amount of light a healthy eye needs at 20 years of age, twice as much is usually required at 40 and three times as much at 60. A good overall level of lighting is therefore very important to help you make the best use of your eyesight.

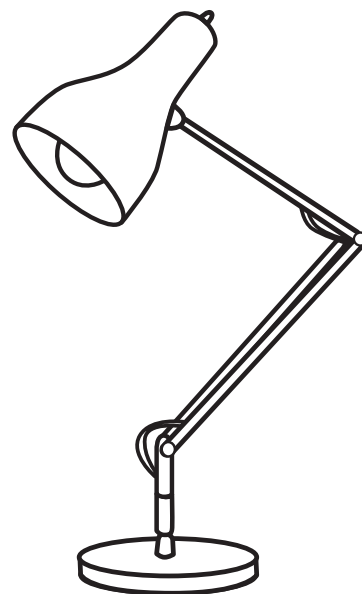
Natural daylight is a very important source of light but a surprisingly large amount is lost through dirty windows or curtains. To increase levels of daylight in your home:

- keep the windows clean;
- pull curtains back as far as possible; and
- keep the net curtains clean, or remove them altogether.

Vertical and horizontal blinds can be a good alternative to curtains. They allow you to control the amount of light coming into your home. You can use blinds to reduce glare and to direct light at the angle most useful for you. You should also ensure that you have adequate electric lighting. **Good lighting is particularly important at the top and bottom of stairs to help you avoid falls.**

For reading or close work, make sure you have direct light from a flexible table lamp, positioned in front of

you, shining down on to your book or work. Fluorescent lamps are particularly efficient as they produce a lot of light but very little heat.



## Serious sight loss

Even when wearing the right glasses or contact lenses, some people still can't see very well. It can be difficult to come to terms with serious sight loss and people often experience a number of emotions, including anger, grief and loss. This is a natural reaction, and counselling can sometimes help. Ask your doctor or social worker if counselling is available in your area, or contact RNIB for information.

## Optical aids

There are many different optical aids which can help people with serious sight loss see better. The simplest optical aids are special magnifiers. These can make things look bigger so that you can perform tasks you find difficult because your eyesight has deteriorated. Magnifiers may be held in your hand, have their own stand or they may be built into your glasses.

**Reading frames** or ‘**typoscopes**’ are useful to reduce glare and concentrate vision on the area of print being read. You can make your own very easily by cutting out an oblong from a piece of black card.

It is important that you get optical aids which are suitable for your particular eye condition and for a given activity. It is likely you will want to do different things such as reading the newspaper, watching television, or reading a bus number, so you may find that you need several different types.

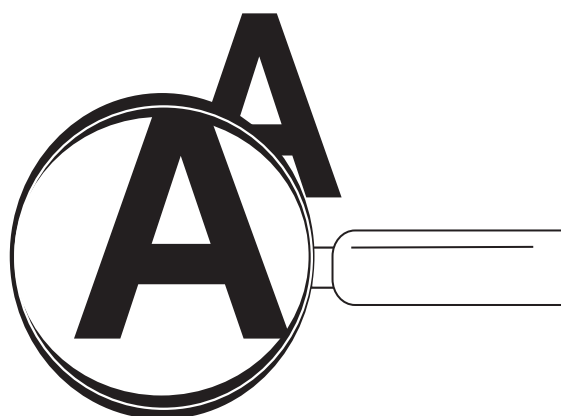
For advice on optical aids, you should ask your doctor or eye specialist (ophthalmologist) to refer you to a low vision clinic.



## Low vision clinics

Low vision clinics are usually based in hospitals. Specialist staff at the clinic can suggest ways you can make the best possible use of the sight you have and

assess which optical aids would help you most. This equipment can nearly always be supplied to you on loan. Ask your doctor or ophthalmologist if there is one in your area they can refer you to.



## Practical aids to daily living

If you have problems with your sight there are lots of gadgets and equipment which can help you lead an independent life. For example, a talking watch, or one with a large face, will make telling the time easier and talking kitchen scales can help with cooking. To find out what is available, contact the Disabled Living Foundation on 0845 130 9177. RNIB and the Partially Sighted Society can also advise you on what is available.

## Rehabilitation workers

Rehabilitation workers can give you practical advice on how to use your low vision aids so that you get the maximum benefit from them.

They can also advise on ways to make life easier at home – including how to use lighting effectively and

practical aids for daily living. They are also able to advise you on how to adapt your kitchen and other areas of your home so that it is easier to manage your daily routine.

Rehabilitation workers are usually employed by the social services department at your local council. In some areas they are employed by local voluntary societies for visually impaired people. If you have difficulties finding out about low vision clinics or rehabilitation workers in your area, contact the RNIB helpline.

## Large print books and games

Large print books are available through local libraries. You can also get a variety of large print games such as playing cards, bingo sets, Monopoly and Scrabble. For more information contact the RNIB helpline.

## Talking books and newspapers

RNIB provides a **Talking Book Service** which can supply a large range of books on audio tape. Contact the RNIB helpline for more details.

Another organisation, **Calibre**, runs a free library service for anyone who has difficulty reading print books. They have an extensive range of books on audio cassette and will deliver the tapes to your home. For

more information contact Calibre, New Road, Weston Turville, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire HP22 5XQ; tel: 01296 432339; web: [www.calibre.org.uk](http://www.calibre.org.uk)

Newspapers and magazines are available on audio tape through most libraries. **The Talking Newspapers Association** can also supply them on audio tape, computer disk, CD-Rom, or by email. For more information contact TNAUK, National Recording Centre, 10 Browning Road, Heathfield, East Sussex TN21 8DB; tel: 01435 866102; web: [www.tnauk.org.uk](http://www.tnauk.org.uk)

## Registering as sight impaired

People with serious sight loss may register with the local authority as sight impaired or seriously sight impaired (this used to be known as registering as partially sighted or blind). Being registered as seriously sight impaired doesn't usually mean you cannot see at all; most people who are registered do still have some useful vision.

You do not have to register, but it can offer advantages. For example, you will be automatically entitled to concessions such as a reduction in the price of your TV Licence if you are registered as seriously sight impaired. And your claim for disability

benefits may be strengthened if you are registered as sight impaired or seriously sight impaired. SeniorLine and the RNIB Welfare Rights Service can give you advice on this.

If you think you need help with day-to-day tasks or that you might be at risk of an accident you can contact your local social services for an assessment, even if you are not registered (in Scotland contact your social work department and in Northern Ireland contact your health and social services trust). Your optician can give you a letter of visual impairment (LVI) which gives you the details you need.

## How to register

Ask your doctor to refer you to an eye specialist (ophthalmologist). They will examine your eyes to assess whether you are eligible to be certified as sight impaired or seriously sight impaired. If you are eligible, the eye specialist will complete and sign a special form. With your permission, a copy will be sent to your local social services. They should then visit you to talk about being included on the register and the needs you have. For more information on the registration process and the benefits of registering, contact RNIB.



## **Welfare and disability benefits**

If you have difficulties with your sight, you may qualify for disability benefits such as Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance, even if you aren't registered as sight impaired or seriously sight impaired. If you are living on a low income you may also be entitled to benefits such as Pension Credit or Housing Benefit. You can find out about these benefits in Help the Aged's free advice leaflets 'Claiming Disability Benefits' and 'Can You Claim It?'.

If you would like to check whether you are receiving all the benefits you are entitled to, contact either SeniorLine on 0808 800 6565 (0808 808 7575 in Northern Ireland) or call the RNIB helpline and ask for the Welfare Rights Service.

## **Common eye conditions**

Some eye conditions cause peoples' eyes to deteriorate so that they have difficulty seeing even with glasses. This section looks at the most common eye conditions in later life.

## Cataract

This is a condition which makes the lens inside the eye cloudy instead of clear. If you have a cataract you may find that your vision seems misty and blurred, especially in strong sunlight. Most cases can be treated easily by removing the cloudy lens and replacing it with an artificial lens.

For more information, RNIB produces a helpful leaflet 'Understanding cataracts'.

## Macular degeneration

This is a condition which affects the macula, a part of the retina at the back of the eye. The macula enables us to see detail, for example print, and to appreciate colour. With macular degeneration, your central vision is damaged, making it hard to read and recognise faces. However, there are a variety of optical aids available which can help you to make the most of your remaining sight.

RNIB produces a leaflet called 'Understanding age-related macular degeneration'. There is also a group called the **Macular Disease Society**, which can offer support and information on the condition. They can be contacted at: Macular Disease Society, PO Box 1870, Andover SP10 9AD; helpline: 0845 241 2041; web: [www.maculardisease.org](http://www.maculardisease.org)

## Glaucoma

Glaucoma is the name for a group of eye conditions involving damage to the optic nerve at the back of the eye. It is usually caused by raised pressure in the eye. This has nothing to do with your blood pressure. Glaucoma can lead to 'tunnel vision' but treatment, either with eye-drops or surgery, can be very successful if started early.

If you have glaucoma you should tell your relatives as it can run in the family. People over 40 who are related to someone with glaucoma can also claim free eye tests.

For further information, RNIB produces a useful leaflet 'Understanding glaucoma'. There is also an organisation called the **International Glaucoma Association** which you can contact for more information and advice. Their address is Woodcote House, 15 Highpoint Business Village, Henwood, Ashford, Kent TN24 8DH; helpline: 0870 609 1870; web: [www.glaucoma-association.com](http://www.glaucoma-association.com)

## Diabetic retinopathy

This is the term often used to describe changes at the back of the eye which may cause sight problems in people with diabetes. Often you won't notice any

changes in your vision in the early stages, so regular eye tests are very important. In time your vision may become blurred and patchy. Laser treatment is usually given to stop this condition getting any worse. You can also help to stop your sight deteriorating by controlling your diabetes.

You can find out more from the leaflet 'Understanding diabetic retinopathy' which is available from RNIB. Information about diabetes and sight loss is also available from **Diabetes UK**, 10 Parkway, London NW1 7AA; Careline: 0845 120 2960; web: [www.diabetes.org.uk](http://www.diabetes.org.uk)

Some eye conditions will respond to treatment, but even if treatment is ineffective or unavailable, there is advice and equipment which can help you make the most of your remaining sight. See pages 11 to 15 for more information.

Remember – the sooner some eye conditions are detected, the easier it is stop them getting worse. **You should have an eye test at least every two years.**

## Useful contacts

### Action for Blind People

14–16 Verney Road

London SE16 3DZ

Tel: 020 7635 4800

Web: [www.afbp.org](http://www.afbp.org)

Action for Blind People runs a free national information and advice service on many issues associated with visual impairment. They also give grants, organise holidays and run housing schemes for visually impaired people.

### Partially Sighted Society

Queen's Road

Doncaster

South Yorkshire DN1 2XA

Tel: 01302 323132

The Partially Sighted Society has a small number of local self-help branches and Sight Centres. They can supply aids to daily living for people with impaired sight, offer advice and a range of large print leaflets and publications.

**RNIB**

105 Judd Street

London WC1H 9NE

Helpline: 0845 766 9999

Web: [www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)

RNIB is the largest organisation for people with serious sight loss in the UK. They provide a range of services, advice and information, including a wide range of leaflets and publications, many of which are available in large print, tape, Braille, Moon and languages other than English. RNIB can also give you details of local organisations for people with sight loss which can provide you with local help and support.

# Help the Aged produces a range of free advice leaflets for older people

## Financial leaflets

- Can You Claim It?
- Check Your Tax
- Claiming Disability Benefits
- Questions on Pensions
- Thinking About Money

## Housing and home safety leaflets

- Care Homes
- Fire
- Help in Your Home
- Housing Matters
- Keep Out the Cold
- Your Safety
- Your Security

## Health leaflets

- Bereavement
- Better Hearing
- Better Sight
- Bladder and Bowel Weakness
- Fight the Flu
- Fitter Feet
- Healthy Bones
- Healthy Eating
- Keeping Mobile
- Managing Your Medicines
- Shingles
- Staying Steady

The Outside Clinic are one of the founder members of the Federation of Ophthalmic and Dispensing Opticians (FODO) Domiciliary Eyecare Committee.

The company provide at-home eye testing and dispensing services to anyone who cannot attend a high street optician without help or assistance.

The company are registered with every Primary Care Trust in the UK, and adhere to the professional Code of Practice for domiciliary providers. All our professional staff have professional registration and Criminal Records Bureau enhanced disclosures.

The Outside Clinic are proud to sponsor the Better Sight leaflet and work in partnership with Help the Aged.



Leaflets are free of charge and available in single copies for individuals or in large quantities for organisations. You can get leaflets in the following ways:

- by writing to the Information Resources Team
- by email on [adviceleaflets@helptheaged.org.uk](mailto:adviceleaflets@helptheaged.org.uk)
- by faxing on 020 7239 1839

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