

Starting out

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# Making the most of your sight



Supporting people  
with sight loss

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## About this guide

Many people with sight loss may still have some useful vision which they can use day to day. This leaflet aims to give you lots of tips and ideas about how you can make the most of your sight.

If you have low or reduced vision, you can make things:

**Bigger** – using magnification and large print

**Brighter** – using the right level of light

**Bolder** – using contrasting colours and clear design.

There are many products and adaptations that can help you. In this leaflet you can discover useful tips yourself and information about professionals that can help.

We also explain low vision assessments, which you have with an optometrist or low vision specialist who can not only advise on ways to make the most of your sight, but also what magnifier would be best for you.

In this guide we will mention an online listings directory called the Sightline Directory. This

is a website run by RNIB which has details of low vision assessment centres and resource centres. You can access the Sightline Directory for free at [sightlinedirectory.org.uk](https://sightlinedirectory.org.uk) and use your postcode to find organisations and services near you.

If you have any questions about topics covered in this guide or want to discuss any concerns about your sight, please call our Helpline. We're ready to help in any way we can.

**RNIB Helpline**  
**0303 123 9999**  
**[helpline@rnib.org.uk](mailto:helpline@rnib.org.uk)**



## Low vision assessments

If your sight can't be improved through new glasses, contact lenses, medical or surgical treatment, then you can ask your GP or your ophthalmologist (also known as a hospital eye doctor) to refer you to a low vision clinic where you can get help to make the most of your sight.

At the clinic, a low vision professional – often an optometrist (also known as an optician) – will perform a low vision assessment. It is important that you have an assessment so that you get advice and the equipment that is best for you. There should broadly be three stages to your assessment:

- A discussion about what activities you find difficult and what tasks you need more help with.
- An assessment to find which magnifying devices, lighting and other equipment will help you most and a chance to try them out.
- Some training in using the equipment, and how to look after it.

It's a good idea to think about what you need help with before you attend your assessment. Take letters, a book, labels or items that you

find difficult to read; this may help the low vision assessor to provide solutions.

Some low vision aids help you to do lots of useful things close up such as reading letters, the headlines in a newspaper, instructions, doing a crossword, or seeing controls on a cooker or sewing machine. Other aids can help you to see things that are far away, such as bus numbers, train departure boards or viewing scenery when outdoors. The low vision assessor will show you how to get the best out of the equipment they prescribe. With a little practice, most people find magnifiers a great help in their daily lives.

Your low vision assessor may advise whether you should have your glasses prescription checked. Making sure you use the correct strength of glasses can be really important in making the most of your sight. When your low vision assessor has listened to the difficulties you have, they will help you choose a magnifier which is right for you.

They will also give you advice on making the most of the magnifier and how to use it, for example, how far to hold it from whatever it is that you are reading, how to adjust the focus and also how to change the batteries.

Low vision assessments usually take place in a low vision clinic based in a hospital, although it could be at your local society for blind and partially sighted people or a local optometrist. If you have difficulty getting out and about, you should be able to have an assessment in your home. Ask your low vision specialist or your local optometrist about services in your area. Alternatively, you can search online based on where you live:

- In England, use the NHS Choices website at **[nhs.uk/Service-Search](https://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search)**
- In Wales, visit the NHS Direct Wales website at **[nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/localservices](https://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/localservices)**
- In Scotland, use the NHS 24 website at **[nhs24.com](https://www.nhs24.com)**
- In Northern Ireland, use the Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland website at **[servicefinder.hscni.net](https://www.servicefinder.hscni.net)**

To find out more about low vision services in your area, ask your GP or contact your local social services department. Our Sightline Directory might also have details of your closest low vision centre, or you can call our Helpline.



# How can I make the most of my sight?

## Bigger

Making things bigger usually makes them easier to see. By doing this, you can often use more of your vision to help make sense of what you're seeing.

Many people with central vision loss find that this helps a lot, but people with a limited field of vision may not find making things bigger as useful. A low vision assessment will help you work out how useful it will be for you.

## Bigger text or items

There is a wide range of easy-to-see products on the market. Clocks and watches with large numbers, big button telephones, large print books and calendars are just some of the items that may help.

Increasing text size can also help. If you're reading text on a phone, tablet or computer, there are usually accessibility options that can increase the size of the text. Alternatively, you can install software, such as ZoomText, that will increase the size and change the contrast on your screen. Our Confident Living leaflet

on Technology covers all the basics, and you can order a free copy from our Helpline.

If you receive letters, bills and statements from companies but the text size is too small for you, you can ask them to re-send it in another format like large print. Under the Equality Act you can ask for any letter to be sent in your preferred format – so if you would prefer an audio version of the letter rather than large print, the company you're contacting should be able provide this.

## Magnifiers

You may find magnifiers helpful for daily tasks. People use magnifiers mostly for reading, but you can use them for many activities and tasks around the home, including needlework and DIY as well as some outdoor tasks.

There are many types of magnifiers available. It is best to choose a magnifier with the professional who carries out your low vision assessment. They will assess which is the right magnifier for the task you need to do and if you are using the magnifier correctly. NHS low vision clinics usually provide a magnifier free of charge.

Magnifiers use a light and lens which increases the size of whatever you're looking at. However, there are lots of different types of magnifiers such as handheld, stand, pocket size or spectacle mounted. Many people find that a combination of using a magnifier, good contrast around the house or electronic magnification can help them with the challenge of living with sight loss.

Stronger magnifiers can take practice to use because they are smaller and have quite a reduced focusing distance. It is therefore very important that they are prescribed for you, rather than purchased without professional support. If you don't find the magnifier that works best for you first time, keep persevering as there is almost always a magnifier that will do the job.

### Types of magnifiers and their benefits

**Handheld** magnifiers are easy to use and vary in features and power. They are usually quite small, so are easy to carry around in a bag or your pocket. Some have an in-built light to help brighten what you are looking at. They are great for reading in the home or while you're out and about – handheld magnifiers can be very useful whilst shopping to read prices or a menu in a restaurant.

**Stand** magnifiers are specially designed with a stand that allows you to place the magnifier on the page and slide across the print as you read it. This means that instead of holding the magnifier away from the page, you can rest it on a table while reading. Some people find this more comfortable for their arms, hands and shoulders.

**Chest** magnifiers are generally large, low-powered magnifiers with an adjustable cord to hang around your neck while it rests on your chest area or a stand that allows you to hold objects underneath it. They have low magnification but offer a wide viewing area. They are useful for some reading tasks and activities such as sewing, DIY and personal care (for example cutting fingernails). These are mainly useful for people with mild sight loss as they have quite weak power and it's not possible to make them any stronger.

There are also **flat field** magnifiers. They are helpful if you have relatively good vision and are useful for reading reference material with columns or lists of information.

**Distance** magnifiers, including binoculars and telescopes, are also available. For example, you could find a small telescope useful for identifying bus or train information on the bus indicator boards.

**Video magnifiers** use a camera and screen to make an image easier to see, not just by making it bigger but by changing the colours and contrast. Some magnifiers have the ability to capture text and save it so you can read at a later date. They are available in desktop and portable versions. They are sometimes called electronic magnifiers instead.

Our Everyday Living Solutions catalogue contains product information about various magnifiers and lighting options. You can order a copy by calling our Helpline or visit our Online Shop at **shop.rnib.org.uk**. However, you should get advice from a low vision specialist before buying a particular product to make sure it meets your needs in the best way.

## Brighter

You should make sure that you have as much light as you feel comfortable with for each task that you do. Everyone is different and you will need to find the amount of light that you're comfortable with.

At your low vision assessment your practitioner should be able to give you general advice about lighting. A rehabilitation worker from the sensory team at social services should be able to give you specific advice for your home.

## Lighting

Good lighting can help you make the most of your sight by increasing contrast and clarity. This should make you feel more independent in your home, as you'll be able to move around safely and easily. It can help you to avoid falls and to continue with or take up hobbies and interests.

Because of your eye condition, your eyes may need more time to adapt to varying lighting levels within your home. When you go from a bright room to a dark room it may take several minutes for your eyes to adjust. Having consistent, even and controllable lighting levels throughout your home could help reduce the time it takes your eyes to adjust. However some eye conditions cause people to experience



uncomfortable glare problems so it isn't always just a case of increasing the brightness of all the lights in your home.

You can make the most of natural daylight in your home by:

- using window blinds with horizontal or vertical slats to control bright light and glare
- keeping curtains secured or tied back from windows
- not using net curtains as they block light.

### General lighting

General lighting should give an even light to avoid shadows and dark areas. Brightness levels should be similar across rooms to avoid your eyes having to adjust when moving between well-lit and significantly darker areas.

Lighting in your home can be improved relatively simply and quickly, without affecting decorations or furnishings. You can, for example, fit bulbs that give more light; change shades and fittings to increase light levels and prevent glare; and add a table, desk or floor light.

Options for general lighting include ceiling lights, multi-arm pendant lights (so multiple bulbs are used), wall lights and spotlights.

### Task lighting

With this form of lighting, you can direct light where you need it most. It is ideal for detailed activities and close-up tasks such as reading, writing, preparing and eating food, and hobbies such as knitting or sewing. For example, when reading, it may be easier to see text if you use a lamp that can be adjusted so that the page that you are reading is illuminated directly. They offer great flexibility as they can be moved easily to use them where you need them. You can also use portable lights in the kitchen, over the cooker and in wardrobes.

To get the most from task lighting you should place it between you and the task so that the shade is below your eye level to reduce glare. Remember to use general lighting alongside task lighting to help prevent eye strain caused by shadows.

Your choice of task light will depend on what you are doing, the level of light required and where the task is located. Task lights are available in floor standing, portable and desk

versions, as well as book lights. They use different bulbs including LED, fluorescent (CFLs) and halogen.

If you would like advice on how to improve the lighting in your home, contact our Helpline.

## Glare

Glare is when a light source affects our ability to see clearly. Often this is a problem if you aren't able to control lighting, for example when you are outside, in a supermarket or at work.

Many people use UV eye shields and/or wraparound shades to deal with glare and light sensitivity. They are larger than normal and can stop light from entering above and to the sides – the fit of these is important to stop the light coming in from the edges of the frame. By reducing the amount of ultra violet light that enters your eyes, eye shields can help to reduce glare and light sensitivity. Tinted lenses can also improve contrast and make your vision more comfortable. You should try on different colours as the tint can vary. It's important to try them on outside so that you can work out the best tint for you.



In addition to UV eye shields and wraparound shades, a hat with a brim can also help shield the light too.

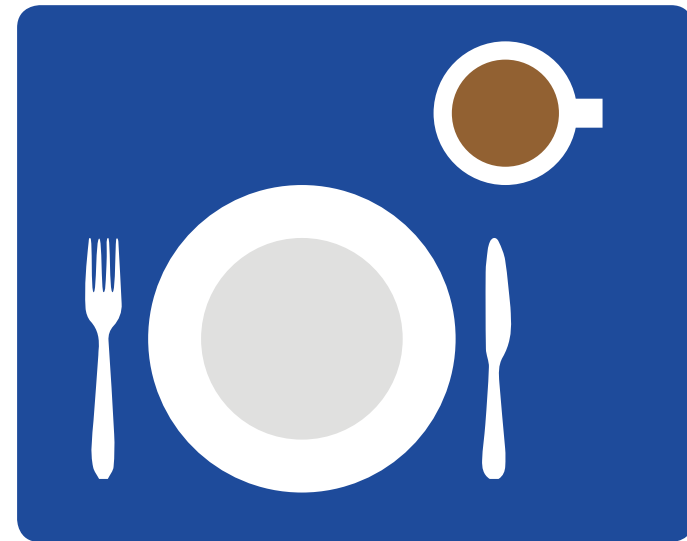
## Bolder

Using contrasting colours can really help. Contrast is how an object or text stands out from its background because of its colour or tone. Black on white is the strongest contrast, but there are other interesting colour combinations that can also provide the same benefit.

Contrast can be used in different ways - for example, using cups or coloured glasses which contrast with your table or dark coloured chopping boards to help with preparing vegetables. Door frames which contrast with the door or your walls, or a duvet which contrasts with the carpet are also good examples. Some people may find that removing different patterns in a room can help or perhaps even using just one strong pattern instead.

Using bold felt tip pen to write with will not only make the text bolder, but also bigger. A notebook with thick lines will help guide your writing which can help when taking notes too.

Below is an example showing how the colour contrast of white crockery against a dark blue table mat helps with visibility.



## Technology

Changing the brightness, contrast or screen resolution can all help when using phones, tablets and computers. Many popular smartphones and tablets have in-built accessibility features that you can use to change screen colours or font sizes. You can also choose from a range of free or paid-for accessibility software to make your computer easier to use.

Our Confident Living series leaflet on Technology provides useful advice on how to use technology when you have sight loss. You can read about the accessibility features of computers, phones, video magnifiers, TVs and radios. Call our Helpline to order your copy.

## Other products that can help

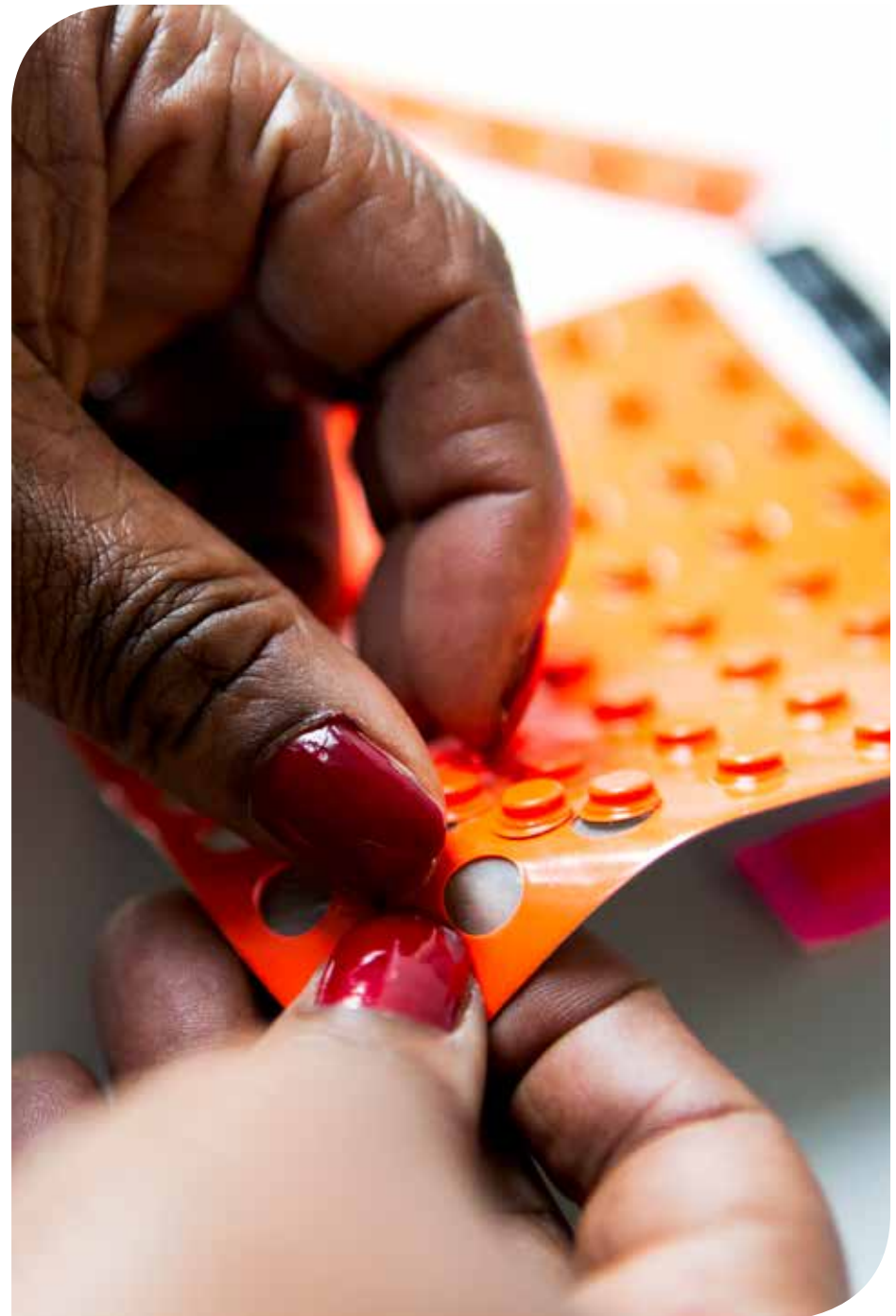
There are many products that can help you to maintain your independence. You may have to buy products from more specialist suppliers, like our Online Shop, but there are plenty of other solutions available. You can mix and match specialist and everyday products to find a suitable combination for you. If you would prefer to try out an item before buying it, many local societies have resource centres you can visit.

We sell a wide range of products that can help you to make the most of your sight. Many are for everyday use, both in and outside the home. They include:

- Mobile and landline phones, with large number keypads and large, high contrast screens.
- Talking phones that announce number and menu selections.
- Talking and tactile watches, and watches with large numbers and hands.
- A range of home and kitchen products such as the audible/vibratory liquid level indicator. This clips over the top of a mug or cup and will let you know when the liquid reaches the right level. Other items include a safety peeler, contrasting cups, automatic jar opener and speaking weighing scales.

- Talking televisions and Freeview recorders. Some people find that having a universal TV remote control with large navigation buttons helps them to use their current TV.
- A wide range of books and magazines in a variety of formats, and large or giant print puzzle books. You can also get large print stationery, including address books, diaries and calendars.
- Products to help with note taking and making lists.
- Tactile labelling products. Bumpons are self-adhesive raised plastic markers that come in different colours in either a circle or square shape. They can be used on any surface and are helpful for identifying where a setting might be on a microwave, for example.
- Audio labelling products and voice recorders. The PenFriend can be used to label a wide range of items. You can record short or long messages on each label, making it perfect to label clothes, food or other items in the house.

To see the items we have in our Online Shop, visit [shop.rnib.org.uk](https://shop.rnib.org.uk) or call our Helpline and ask for our Everyday Living Solutions catalogue. You can visit the Sightline Directory to find your nearest supplier or resource centre.



## Glossary

We've used some terms which you might be unfamiliar with if you haven't had a low vision assessment before, so we've put together this glossary which you can quickly refer back to.

**Ophthalmologists** are specialist eye doctors who diagnose, treat and monitor eye conditions with medication and surgery. They usually work in hospital eye departments or clinics (often called ophthalmology departments).

**Optometrists/opticians** are qualified to examine your vision, prescribe glasses and detect eye conditions. Optometrists are able to detect eye conditions and refer you to an ophthalmologist for diagnosis and treatment if it is needed. Some optometrists may specialise in low vision and may help you with your low vision aids.

**Optical magnifiers** are magnifiers which use an optical lens to make things look bigger.

**Video magnifiers** are magnifiers which use a camera to make items look bigger and change the contrast or colour.

**Focusing distance** is the distance away from the magnifier that you have to hold or move an object for it to be seen clearly.

**Magnification level** is the number of times bigger a magnifier makes an object or text look. For example, a 4x magnifier is a lens that makes the object look four times bigger if it is used correctly.

**Optical aids** are aids that involve the use of an optical lens such as magnifiers, spectacles or contact lenses.

**Non-optical aids** are equipment that is designed to help someone make the most of their sight or provide an alternative to using their sight. These are items such as a large print newspaper or a talking clock.

## Further information

### RNIB Helpline

Our Helpline is your direct line to the support, advice and products you need. We'll help you to find out what's available in your area and beyond, both from RNIB and other organisations.

Whether you want to know more about your eye condition, buy a product from our shop, join our library, find out about possible benefit entitlements, be put in touch with a trained counsellor, or make a general enquiry, we're only a call away.

Call **0303 123 9999** or email **helpline@rnib.org.uk**

We're ready to answer your call Monday to Friday 8.45am to 5.30pm.

### Sightline directory

Find organisations in your area that support blind and partially sighted people – including suppliers of products for people with low vision – by using our online directory. Visit **sightlinedirectory.org.uk**

### Visionary

Visionary is an association of local sight loss charities for visually impaired people. Local societies offer a range of services that can include resource centres, rehabilitation, employment support, IT training and emotional support. You can find your local society through the Sightline directory or by contacting Visionary. Call **020 8417 0942**, email **visionary@visionary.org.uk** or visit **visionary.org.uk**



## We value your feedback

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1. Where did you receive your copy of this leaflet?

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2. Did you find the information easy to read and understand? Please give details of anything you feel could be improved.

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3. Is there any information you would have found helpful, that was missing?

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4. Do you have any other comments about this leaflet or any aspect of your contact with RNIB?

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### About the Starting Out series

The Starting Out series aims to give people who are losing or have recently lost their sight essential information about living with sight loss. Other titles in the series are:

- Benefits, concessions and registration
- Education
- Employment
- Emotional support
- Help from social services
- Housing

### About the Confident Living series

The Confident Living series is for people who are losing or have recently lost their sight and are trying to build their confidence to continue to lead full and independent lives. Titles in the series are:

- Leisure
- Managing your money
- Reading
- Shopping
- Technology
- Travel

All these leaflets are available in audio, print and braille formats. To order please contact our Helpline on **0303 123 9999** (all calls charged at local rate), email **helpline@rnib.org.uk** or visit **shop.rnib.org.uk**

For a full list of the information sources used in any of these titles please contact **ckit@rnib.org.uk**

If you or someone you know is living with sight loss, we're here to help. Call RNIB's Helpline on **0303 123 9999** or email us at **helpline@rnib.org.uk**

**Ask RNIB** is the simple, easy to use way to find the answers to your questions online – try it today at **rnib.org.uk/ask**

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