# Activities for older people with sight loss in a care home setting

## Introduction

There are certainly more people living with sight loss in the care home where you work than you think. There are over 2 million people in the UK living with sight loss and 80 per cent are 65 years or older. 250,000 people are living with sight loss and dementia (1,2). Within care homes, Alzheimer’s Society estimate 70 per cent of residents have dementia or severe memory problems (3)**.**

Withdrawal from activities is sometimes a good indicator that someone may have sight loss. However, there are many ways that people living with sight loss can take part in group and individual activities.

Many of the activities listed below will be familiar to activity organisers, care staff and specialist workers. In these instances, a description of them is not given; they are listed merely to show that living with sight loss or having no vision is not necessarily a barrier to trying them out. Where special adaptations are made, these are described.

## Reading and listening

The inability to carry on reading standard print books can have a devastating effect on the leisure time of many people who have lost their sight. If a person can no longer read print, then audio books offer an alternative.

While not suitable for everyone RNIB talking books remain popular and can be delivered to your home. Thousands of professionally narrated titles are available on, USB stick, digital downloads or through an Alexa enabled device such as your smart speaker, tablet, or phone. You don’t have to be registered as blind or partially sighted, though you do have to have difficulty reading standard print. To contact the Talking Books Service, call our Helpline on **0303 123 9999** or email [helpline@rnib.org.uk](mailto:library@rnib.org.uk).

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Some people, however, find using audio books difficult and prefer to have someone read to them, one-to-one or as a group.

Some suggested reading activities include:

* group listening to extracts from national or local newspapers
* book reading in instalments – a regular time slot for someone reading a short story or a novel can create something for listeners to look forward too.

## Arts and crafts

Just because someone has sight loss, it doesn’t mean that they cannot still participate in and enjoy arts and crafts which involve colour, contrast, or detail.

However, there are some things you can do to improve the accessibility of your activity. For example, ensure that the room has good natural light and that the resident is sitting in the best possible position to make use of that light. It might also help to have a different colour tablecloth as contrast to the colour of the equipment on top of the table. Some suggestions for activities are below:

* Silk screen painting
* Painting – people adapt their techniques if they lose their sight. Some may find detailed work near impossible, preferring washes of colour, whilst others may only be able to work with the smallest of lines in the smallest of spaces. Watercolours and acrylics are favoured because some people with sight loss don’t like the idea of getting paint on their clothes as they are not able to see it to clean it. Charcoal on a white board or chalk on a black board may also work well
* Papier-mâché models – built on wire frames made by twisting wire into shape, covering with papier-mâché then painting. This is a very tactile activity
* Collages – use tactile objects such as seashells, pasta shells, rope, and string and pot-pourri, then glue to cork tiling
* Tactile door plaques – made as above, or with wood, with a symbol of something dear to the resident’s heart
* Mosaic work – mosaics of a colour the person can clearly make out can be glued onto a surface such as a small table or stool, in striking patterns
* Pottery – not everyone likes the feel of sticky clay on their fingers; salt-dough is cheaper and less messy.

## Games and quizzes

There are several adaptations you can make to existing games, either using special equipment and products, or by giving some assistance to blind and partially sighted players. RNIB Shop offers a range of braille, tactile and large print board games. These include:

* Cards
* Dominoes
* Draughts
* Connect 4

Other examples of popular games and how to make sure residents with sight loss can join in are:

* Crosswords – filled in by staff or a volunteer if done as a group. Large print crossword books are available from retailers including [W H Smith](https://www.whsmith.co.uk/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI1o6J3_WK3wIVCrHtCh0hdAhiEAAYASAAEgJEzfD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds), [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk/) and [maxiaids.com](mailto:www.maxiaids.com)
* Horseracing – you can make a course, including several jumps, where the horses are moved by roll of a large dice. An enthusiastic commentary is needed!
* “Short-mat” bowls – make sure that the space you use as an alley has some sort of boundary e.g., cushions or doorstops. It is also a good idea to have something audible beyond the pins to indicate when a ball has got to the end of the run
* Guess the sound – music or everyday sounds
* The Price is Right – choose and describe an item – furniture, gift, household item, for example – choose a year and guess the price
* Two-minute talk – write topics on cards, each participant chooses one from the pile and talks on that subject for two minutes.

## Theme days

Theme days linked to days in the calendar (like St Patrick’s Day) provide a chance to use all the senses by bringing together food, clothes, music, and quizzes. Other themes could include:

* International days e.g., French day, Italian day, Irish day etc
* Historical or period themes e.g., Victorian evening – port, fruit cake and recitation
* Food tasting e.g., wine tasting, cheese, and wine.

## Visitors to the home

Talks from outside visitors, which can often be negotiated for free, are one of the most popular sessions because it helps residents, who might not get many opportunities to leave the care home, reconnect with the outside world. Some ideas when arranging visitors:

* Pets As Therapy (PAT)
* Local gardening club
* Women’s Institute
* Hand bell ringers
* Local museum service with touchable artefacts
* Music clubs
* Visits from school pupils

## Visits outside

* Mystery tours – invite residents to get in the bus and go, but don’t say where you’re going. A commentary is a must, and if you describe your surroundings this will soon spark conversation and reminiscence from residents
* Canal trip on a wheelchair accessible boat or barge
* The local museum – provided there’s a talk or audio tour, wheelchair accessible facilities and ideally something to touch and explore
* Trip to the beach
* A day at the races – you don’t necessarily need to see the action to get a sense of the occasion or to have a flutter
* Parks offer a range of sensory experiences

For residents living with dementia and sight loss venues and organisations will often offer dementia friendly events.

## Learning

Games and quizzes aren’t for everyone in care. If you hate bingo and a singsong now, why will you suddenly start to like it if you enter care?

Some blind and partially sighted residents may be interested to discover new ways of using technology, as this can enable them to explore new subjects and find out more information about topics that interest them. It can also help them stay connected with family or friends. We have beginner’s guides to technology which can help introduce people with sight loss to the different devices available. The Technology for Life team can give you information and support with:

* making the best use of your smartphone or tablet
* discovering new products that could be useful to you
* troubleshooting and problem solving

For more information call RNIB’s Technology for Life team on **0303 123 9999** or email[tfl@rnib.org.uk](mailto: tfl@rnib.org.uk)Mondayto Friday, 9am to 5pm, or visit our Technology webpage [rnib.org.uk/nations/walescymru/technology-for-life/](https://www.rnib.org.uk/nations/walescymru/technology-for-life/).

## Exercise, movement, and relaxation

Professional advice and guidance should be considered. In addition to the normal armchair aerobics and music and movement sessions are:

* reflexology
* aromatherapy
* seated yoga
* hand massage and manicure
* dancing – not as difficult for people with sight problems as it sounds. You can support or guide the blind or partially sighted person.

## General Advice for Creating an Optimum Environment for Activities

Group activities can become more frustrating to take part in and individuals with sight loss may require support and for some activities to be adapted to ensure inclusion. Before organising any activity, it is important to gain an understanding of the impact of someone’s experience of sight loss and type environment that promotes better vision. Remember, everyone’s experience of living with sight loss will be different, and its impact may vary from day to day.

By implementing these simple actionable tips you will help ensure maximum participation and inclusion:

* Utilise existing vision. If they have better vision in their left or right eye position yourself where you can be best seen
* Implement the 4C’s for glasses: Check they are Correct, Current, Clean and Comfortable
* Support the use of magnifiers if required
* Ensure, even, consistent lighting levels, that can be complimented by task lighting and adjusted to appropriate levels for the person
* Use natural lighting but control sun glare
* Use contrasting colours during the activity as this will aid location and identification, be it equipment or the clothes the activity coordinator is wearing to stand out from the venue and surroundings
* Consider using plain block colours rather than patterns in clothing, tablecloths etc.,
* Reduce visual clutter during tabletop activities, only have items on the table that are being used
* Use large print and keep text clear, concise, and simple
* Matt laminate should be used to reduce glare
* Use adapted equipment, such as tactile board games, large print puzzles and sound balls
* Remember lighting levels, medication and tiredness can affect vision so consider the times of activities
* Consider acoustics and noise levels. Is it easy for instructions or explanations to be heard?
* If required, ensure hearing aids are in and switched on with accompanying hearing loop
* Remember to address people by name so they know you are talking to them and introduce others participating in the activity and describe the activity
* If you leave or re-join the activity let people know.

## Useful contacts

### NAPA: National Association for Providers of Activities for Older People

NAPA is a membership organisation dedicated to helping activity organisers and care staff. There is a membership fee. You can find out more by calling **01494 590 421** or emailing [info@napa-activities.co.uk](mailto:info@napa-activities.co.uk).

You can also view their website [napa-activities.co.uk](https://napa-activities.co.uk/)

### RCOT: The Royal College of Occupational Therapists

RCOT includes ideas for activities. For more information visit their website [rcot.co.uk/about-occupational-therapy/living-well-care-homes-2019](https://www.rcot.co.uk/about-occupational-therapy/living-well-care-homes-2019).

If you want further information on providing care to residents with sight loss, please call the RNIB Helpline on **0303 123 9999** or email [helpline@rnib.org.uk](mailto:helpline@rnib.org.uk).

If you're a professional working in social care, RNIB can provide training and advice to the professionals who transform the lives of blind and partially sighted people. For training enquiries please email [externaltrainingenquiries@rnib.org.uk](mailto:externaltrainingenquiries@rnib.org.uk)

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## References

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2. Bowen M, Edgar DF, Hancock B, Haque S, Shah R, Buchanan S, Iliffe S, Maskell S, Pickett J, Taylor JP, O’Leary N. The Prevalence of Visual Impairment in People with Dementia (the PrOVIDe study): a cross-sectional study of people aged 60–89 years with dementia and qualitative exploration of individual, carer and professional perspectives. Southampton (UK): NIHR Journals Library; 2016 Jul. PMID: 27489923
3. Alzheimer’s Society Statistics Facts for the media | Alzheimer's Society (alzheimers.org.uk) accessed January 2023