



# How to guide people with sight problems

**RNIB**

supporting blind and partially sighted people

# How to guide people with sight problems

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## Five top tips

- 1** Introduce yourself, communicate clearly when offering help and listen to their response (they will confirm if they want assistance).
- 2** Ask where and how they would like to be guided. Allow them to take your arm, rather than you holding or grabbing theirs.
- 3** Point out kerbs and steps as you approach them and say whether they go up or down. Mention any potential hazards that lie ahead and say where they are.
- 4** If you are guiding someone into a seat, place their hand on the back of the seat before they sit down, so they can orientate themselves.
- 5** Say when you have finished providing assistance and are leaving them - make sure they know where they are and which way they are facing.



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# Introduction

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We hope this leaflet will help you feel confident about guiding people with sight problems. There are no hard and fast rules on how to guide people with sight problems but the guidelines in this leaflet are safe and sensible. You may find the person you're guiding doesn't follow these guidelines, but chooses to do something differently because it works better for them.

Your offer to guide someone will usually be welcomed but for some people, physical contact may be a problem due to culture or gender reasons or personal space. Just because a person has a white cane or a guide dog, it doesn't mean they're totally blind. Many people have some useful vision but they might welcome help at times, in an unfamiliar place or at night time, for instance.

If you see a person with a white cane and red bands or a guide dog with a red and white harness, it means the person has sight loss and hearing loss, and they could experience difficulties in particularly noisy or busy environments.

A guide dog in a harness is a working animal and you should always ask a person's permission before you pay attention to their guide dog. If an owner has dropped the dog's harness onto its back, it's a sign that they might need your help to find their way.

# Offering help

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If you see someone who you think needs assistance, you can offer help and introduce yourself. Don't feel you should wait for someone else to offer. If your offer is accepted, ask where they want to go and how they'd like to be guided.

Ask if they'd like to take your arm. Some people will be used to this technique whereas others may like to put a hand on your shoulder or follow you closely. This leaflet gives advice for guiding someone who holds your arm because this is how blind and partially sighted people are trained to use a sighted helper. Not everyone gets training, however, which is one reason why you should ask first.



## Guiding someone with a guide dog

If the blind or partially sighted person has a guide dog you should approach them from the side opposite the dog. Do not take hold of the harness or lead, as the guide dog owner needs these to control the dog. Some people prefer to walk at your side without holding your arm. In some situations you can also walk in front and the dog will follow you.

## Guiding people with other disabilities

You can use many of these techniques with someone who has combined sight and hearing loss. However, it's important to understand that they may have different communication needs. Most people will need you to speak a little more slowly and loudly than usual.

It's best to approach people from the front, speaking as you do. This enables them to use their remaining useful sight and hearing. If a person doesn't respond to this, gently place a hand on their upper arm and leave it there. They will then be able to respond and touch your hand.

You could try tracing letters of the alphabet using your forefinger on the palm of their left hand. Sometimes it's better to guide their right forefinger on their own left palm.

When guiding, they will need information about steps and kerbs. When you approach these potential hazards, spell the word and let them feel you lift your elbow up or drop it down.

People with other disabilities – those who are frail or who do not wish to be touched – may need a different approach.

## Guiding children

Children with sight problems are no different to adults and will usually welcome your offer of help but remember never to grab a child by their hand or arm.

You'll find that most children will be happy for you to hold their hand. If they choose to hold your arm, they may want to hold it above the elbow so that your upper arm is straight, which will help them to anticipate changes of direction. However, you may find that some children will simply want to touch your arm.

As with adults, children have a range of techniques and it's always best to ask them what they prefer.



## Giles's story

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“If I take someone's arm I like to take hold of their arm because it means if I want to stop or want to let go, I can just release my arm. When someone takes hold of my arm it's not in my say so any more. We like to try and be as independent as we can. If someone takes my arm, I'm not independent, they're in control and it's not a comfortable feeling.”

**Giles, 40, was diagnosed with optic neuritis as a result of multiple sclerosis when he was 25. He lost all the central vision in both eyes.**

“My advice to anybody who is looking at a blind or partially sighted person and wondering if they need help is ask them. Sometimes sighted people feel awkward because they think they should know what to do. Sight loss is so different, case by case, that I don't believe anyone would know what to do before asking. So ask. If you see someone you think needs guiding assistance – ask if they would like any help and ask how they would like to be helped.”



# Setting off

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## Walking side by side

If there's room to walk side by side, stand next to the person you're guiding and let them take hold of your arm with their fingers in the crook of your elbow. You can keep your arm pointing downwards or bend it, as long as you keep your upper arm straight. By walking hand to arm in this way, the person you're guiding will be half a pace behind you, making it easier to tell when you're turning your body.

## Walking in single file

You will often need to do this in shops, stations or other busy areas. The person you're guiding will walk behind you instead of at your side. First tell the person you're guiding that you're approaching a narrow or busy area and that you'll need to walk in single file. Move your guiding arm to the middle of your back, keeping it straight. The person you're guiding should step in behind you, still holding onto your arm. There's no need to turn around to check as they will follow you.

If they have a guide dog they will drop its harness handle and let the dog walk behind them on the lead.

When there's room to walk side by side again, bring your arm back to its normal position.

# Kerbs and roads

When you're approaching a kerb, let them know and say whether it's a "kerb up" or "kerb down". Pause at the kerb before stepping up or down and the person you're guiding will feel the change in your body movement through your guiding arm. Take care when you approach a rounded kerb to make sure the person you're guiding reaches it at the same time that you do.



It's important not to assume that just because someone is standing by a kerb that they want to cross the road, and don't be offended if your offer of help is declined.

Always cross the road using the shortest distance – go straight across rather than crossing at an angle. You should use a pedestrian crossing if there is one, but if not, allow plenty of time for the person you're guiding to cross at a normal pace and don't take risks.

If you're parting company after crossing a road, make sure you tell the person you're guiding where they are and which way they're facing.

# Steps, stairs and slopes

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When you approach steps or a slope, make sure you tell the person you're guiding whether the steps go up or down. Wherever possible, they should be on the side with the handrail. If you need to change sides, ask them to stand still and let go of your guiding arm so you can go alongside them. Walk towards the handrail and show its position with your guiding arm.

As you go up steps, they will feel your arm move when you place your weight on the first step. This is their cue to start. As you climb the second step, they're on the first. Tell them when you've reached the last step, stop and allow them to find it with their foot. When they feel their arm resume its normal position they'll know that you're both on the same level again.

Going downstairs is always more hazardous, so give the person you're guiding time to hold onto the handrail and gauge the edge of the first step. Otherwise the technique is the same for going upstairs. Walk one step ahead, stop at the bottom and tell them when there are no more steps.

If you're not as tall as the person you're guiding, take your first step with the foot on the same side as your guiding arm, and the movement will be more clearly felt.

If they have a guide dog, the dog may be a substitute for the handrail or they may prefer to use both handrail and dog, and rejoin you at the bottom of the steps.

# Escalators, travelators and lifts

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Many blind and partially sighted people prefer to avoid escalators so if you're approaching one, ask the person you are guiding if they're happy to use it or if they'd prefer to use an alternative route. If there's no alternative and the person you're guiding is uncomfortable using it, you can ask that the escalator be turned off.

When you're using an escalator, guide the person to the moving handrail and say whether you are going up or down. It's sometimes best if the person you're guiding negotiates the first step on their own, as escalators are often too narrow to take people side by side. If possible, move ahead on the escalator, once you've checked the person you're guiding is safely on it, so that you can help them off.

Travelators should be used in the same way and you will need to say when you're reaching the end.

It's not safe to take a dog on a moving escalator or travelator so you may need to find an alternative. The dog might need to be carried if there is no alternative. Discuss how you will do this or indeed if it is practical.

Lifts are straightforward. Walk in side by side, if possible, and say whether you are moving up or down. Some people may prefer to be next to the lift wall to steady themselves.

# Doorways

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Going through a doorway can be a little complicated. It's important to tell the person you're guiding whether a door is opening towards them or away.

Always try to go through a doorway with the person you're guiding on the hinge side and change sides if necessary. Open the door with your guiding arm – this way they can easily tell whether the door is moving inwards or outwards. As you walk through the doorway the person you're guiding should place their hand flat against the door and slide it along to find the handle. They follow you, slipping their hand to the handle on the other side of the door to close it.

If you're going through a swing door, warn the person you are guiding so that they do not try to close it. If in doubt about how to negotiate a doorway, it may be easier to let the person go through by themselves. Simply let go of them, open the door and rejoin them once they are through. If they have a guide dog they will probably prefer this approach.

Revolving doors are best avoided, especially if the person you're guiding has a dog. If you have to use one, position yourself so that the person you're guiding is in the widest part and guide them in and out carefully.

Automatic doors rarely pose problems, though you should tell the person you're guiding when you're approaching them as the noise could be alarming if they're not expecting it.

# Turnstiles and ticket barriers

Turnstiles are easy if you remember to go through them in single file. Tell the person you're guiding what to expect, get into single file and lead them through it. This will not work with very high turnstiles where there's no alternative but to "talk" the person through it by themselves.



Many people will prefer to use an alternative to ticket barriers, where possible, such as a gate. Guide dogs should not be made to go through an ordinary ticket barrier as this is often both ineffective and dangerous. The dog can set off the beam so that the barrier closes before the owner has gone through.

If you're using an automatic ticket barrier, the person you're guiding should go through first. Position them in the correct place against the barrier, place their ticket in the slot and take it when it is ejected while they go through the barrier. Follow them through and rejoin them on the other side.

# Seating

Never back someone into a seat, always guide them to it and describe it to them. Tell them if it's a dining chair, low sofa or an office chair, for example. Ask them to let go of your guiding arm and place their grip hand on the back, arm or seat of the chair, whichever seems best. If the chair is pushed under a table, put their hand on the chair back and tell them that there is a table. If it's on wheels, you should say so. You might hold the chair back to stop it sliding.



## Rows of seats

Most people prefer to be led into a row of seats – you may need to change sides to do this. When you reach your row, you will both need to side-step (step-pause-step) until the person you are guiding is central to their seat. They can do the rest. If they have a guide dog, the dog will follow them.

When you're leaving, step to the other side of them so that you can lead in the same way. When you both reach the aisle you may need to change sides, in which case you should turn towards them.

# Cars and taxis

If you're travelling by car or mini cab, tell the person whether they're getting into the front or back seat so they can allow for the space available. If you're using a London taxi, 4 x 4 vehicle or "people carrier", say so, because the height of the step and the space inside is different to a standard car.

Place your guiding hand on the car door handle and tell them whether the car is facing left or right. They can then slide their grip hand down your arm to find the door handle and, with their other hand, find the top of the car door and the corner of the door, which can be sharp. This will avoid a nasty bump to the head. They can then open the car door and get in.

If you open the door first, let them know you've done so. Place your guiding hand on the roof so they can position themselves from there – leave the rest to them. Ask if they need help with locating and fastening their seatbelt. At the end of your journey, open the car door and help them out.





# Buses, coaches and trains

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There are no hard and fast rules for getting on and off buses, coaches and trains as they vary so much in their design, but the basic rules are quite simple. Make sure you tell the person you're guiding about any wider than average gaps between the train and the platform. Lead the person you're guiding on and off – you should always go first. Walk in single file along corridors and aisles and use your guiding arm to show the position of suitable handrails and the backs of seats.



# General guiding tips

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- Give instructions where necessary, but don't overdo it and be careful not to push or pull the person you're guiding.
- Match your pace to the person you're guiding.
- Give them time to hold your arm securely before you start walking.
- Remember to give them adequate room around obstacles.
- Watch out for hazards at head height, especially if the person you're guiding is taller than you. It's very easy to walk someone into an overhanging tree or shop canopy.
- Watch out for lamp posts and bollards too. You may find people you're guiding prefer to walk on the pavement edge to avoid such obstacles.
- Explain loud noises, such as road works or alarms.
- Explain changes in ground surface, for example if you're walking from a pavement onto grass or gravel, or if paving slabs and road surfaces are particularly uneven.
- Keep your guiding arm still and relaxed. Don't start waving it about or pointing at things.
- Remember that older people or those with other disabilities may need extra consideration.

# Further information

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## RNIB

### RNIB Helpline

Our team of advice workers are your direct line to the information, support and advice you need. Call **0303 123 9999** or email **helpline@rnib.org.uk**

### Guiding

For the latest information on guiding, visit our website **rnib.org.uk/guiding** where you can watch our guiding videos showing two blind and partially sighted people explain how they like to be guided with helpful guiding tips.

### Visual awareness courses

For more information, call **01733 37 53 70**, email **accessconsultancy@rnib.org.uk** or visit **rnib.org.uk/training** for more information.

## Guide Dogs for the Blind Association

For all information relating to sighted guiding with guide dogs call **0845 372 7499**, email **guidedogs@guidedogs.org.uk** or visit **guidedogs.org.uk** for further information.

**RNIB Helpline**

**0303 123 9999**

**helpline@rnib.org.uk**

If you, or someone you know, is living with sight loss, we're here to help.

**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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