

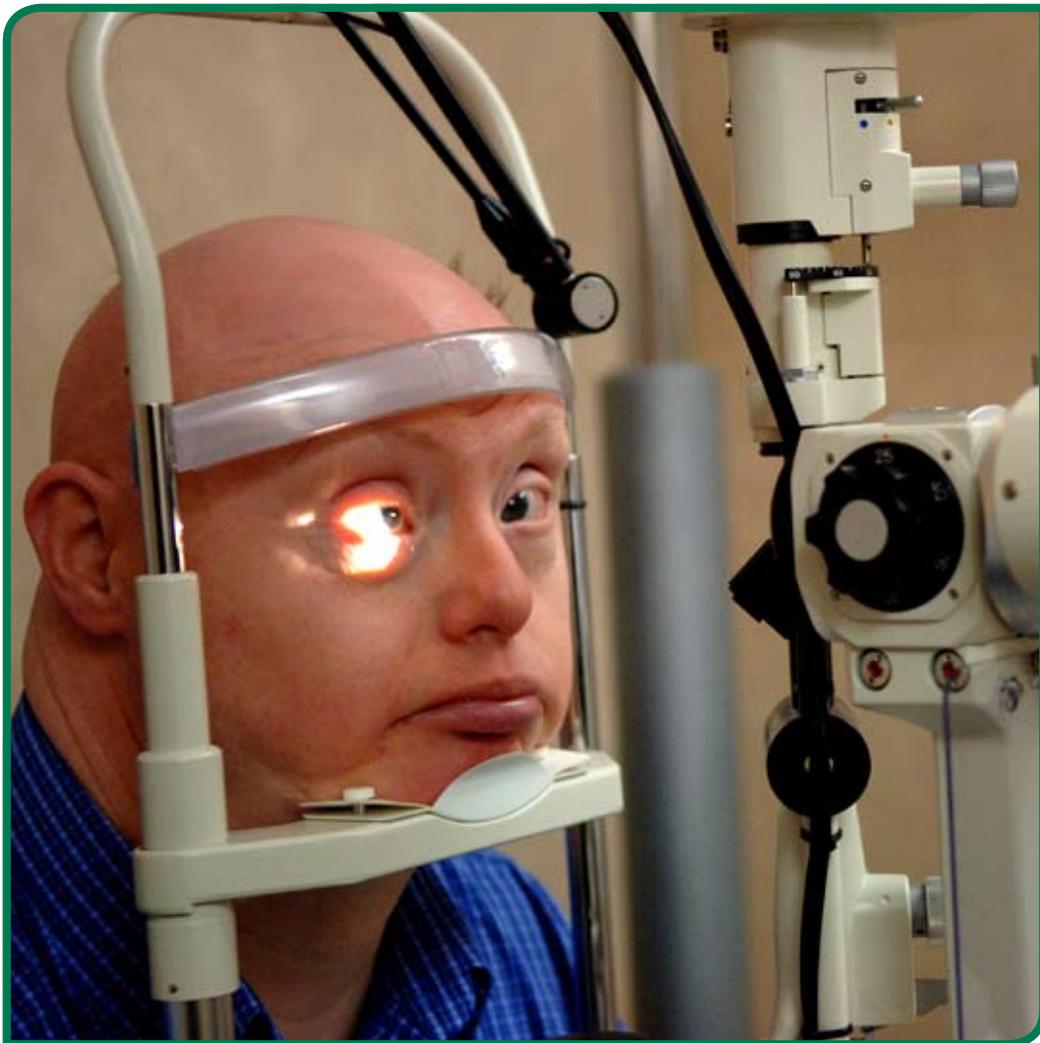


**RNIB**  
Scotland

supporting blind and  
partially sighted people

UK Visual Impairment and  
Learning Disability Services

Learning Disability  
and Sight Loss



## How common is sight loss for people who have a learning disability?

It is estimated that there are 96,500 adults with a learning disability who are blind or partially sighted and this may be the result of:

- ◉ An eye condition, such as cataract or squint
- ◉ Another health condition, such as diabetes
- ◉ Normal ageing of the eye
- ◉ An eye condition associated with the learning disability

People with a learning disability are **ten times more likely** to have serious sight problems, and this will be much higher for people with severe or profound learning disabilities.

Learning disabilities and conditions that may have a direct impact on vision are: Down's Syndrome, Fragile X, Cerebral Palsy and Willams Syndrome.



## What are the signs?

Sight loss is dramatically underestimated in people with a learning disability because the signs can be difficult to separate. One may mask or be mistaken for the effects of the other which may result in sight loss being simply 'overlooked'.

When caring for someone with a learning disability you might want to consider whether the person is having difficulty with:

- ◉ Recognising people
- ◉ Coping with bright light, low light or both
- ◉ Finding objects of interest
- ◉ Hesitant at kerbs and stairs
- ◉ Avoiding obstacles
- ◉ Locating food on their plate
- ◉ Seeing well with their existing glasses



## Sight Loss or Learning Disability?

Sight loss can be disguised in many forms. Some unusual behaviour may be a coping strategy related to sight loss or an attempt to make the most of useful vision.

You may notice the person you care for:

- ◉ Becoming withdrawn or uncommunicative
- ◉ Being clumsy or falling more
- ◉ Rocking, head shaking or flapping their hands
- ◉ Holding things up close
- ◉ Confused and disorientated
- ◉ Startled by noises or people approaching

Some of these things **may** be due to a person's learning disability; but it is important to have their sight tested as sight loss could be contributing to observed behaviours and interactions.



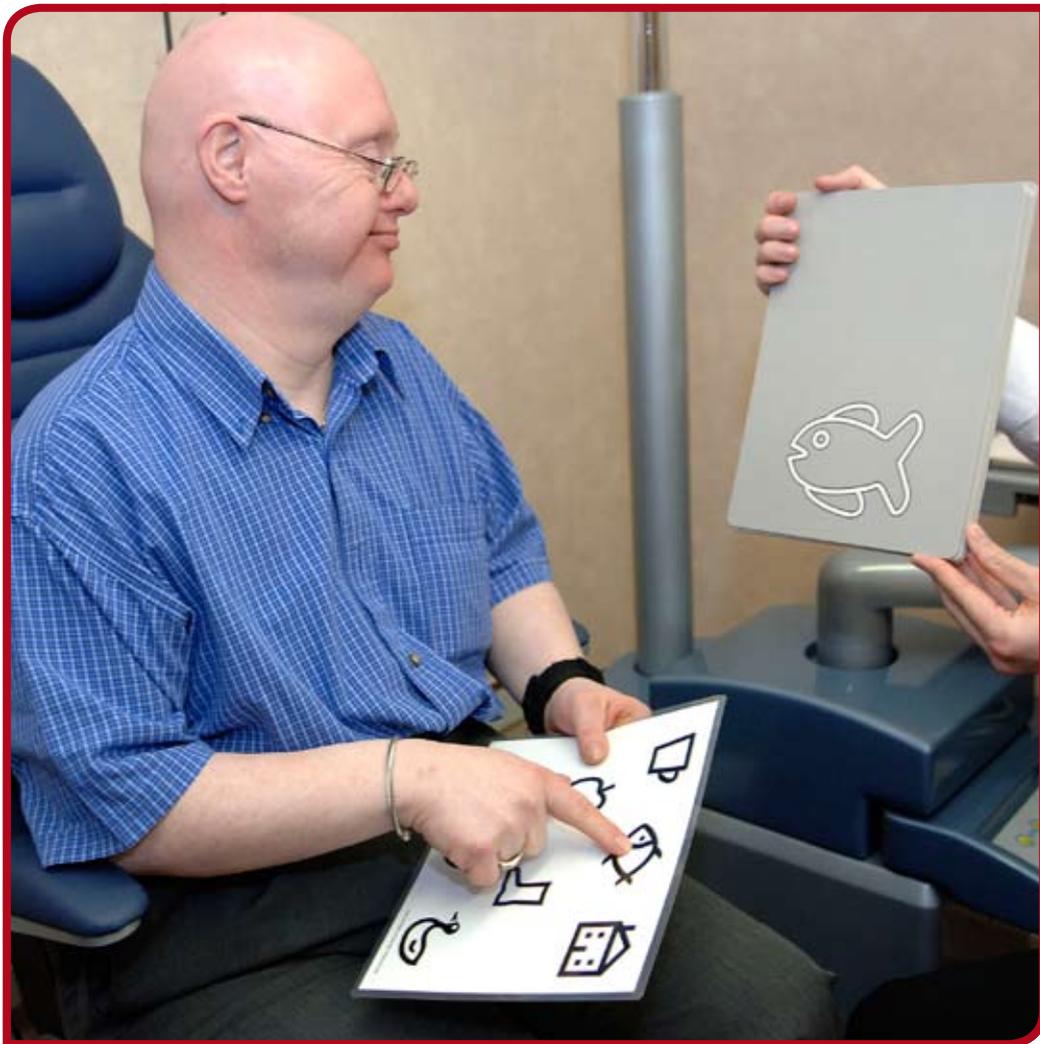
## What should you do?

Many people think that the person they care for can see perfectly well. This is often not the case, and can simply be that they cannot tell you about the changes to their vision.

For this reason, it is important that someone with a learning disability has their sight examined every two years, more often if required. In Scotland the sight test is free for everyone and the over 60's are seen annually.\*

The optician can give advice about eye health, how sight loss might impact on the person's everyday life, and how to make sure that the correct glasses are worn at the right time.

\* In the rest of the UK the eye examination is free to over 60's and you should be seen annually when you are 70 or over.



## Will the sight test be too difficult?

Carers or relatives often feel that the optician may not be able to carry out the sight test due to the person's learning disability, perhaps an inability to read, difficulties with communication or other behavioural support issues.

With some reasonable adjustments everyone can, and should, access eye care. Alternative tests and approaches are available to help everyone participate.

Many opticians will even come to your home or make arrangements to see you at a time most suited to you.

Speak to your local optician to see what support they can offer or contact RNIB for further advice. RNIB provide support and advice to ensure access is person-centred and supported throughout.



## What could help?

- ◉ Make sure glasses are clean and well fitting
- ◉ Make sure the correct glasses are being worn
- ◉ Ensure good even lighting to reduce shadows
- ◉ Reduce the risk of trips and falls by keeping floor and working areas clear of obstacles
- ◉ Use good colour contrast, especially for everyday activities
- ◉ Plain backgrounds can be more helpful than patterned
- ◉ Let the person know where they are, who they are with and what is going on
- ◉ Ensure any medication, especially eye drops are taken

**Get advice or more information from RNIB Scotland or complete the checklist overleaf and take this to the optician.**



## Identifying Sight Loss Checklist

Date of last sight test appointment:

If under 60 does the person attend every 2 years?

YES

NO

If over 60 does the person attend annually?

YES

NO

Is there a family history of eye problems?

YES

NO

Please give details

### Everyday Vision

Has the person stopped a regular activity?

YES

NO

Are they struggling to see the television?

YES

NO

Are they finding it difficult to recognise people?

YES

NO

## Identifying Sight Loss Checklist

### Mobility

Is there an increase in trips/falls?

YES

NO

Does the person bump into furniture?

YES

NO

Does the person overstep/are they hesitant at kerbs or stairs?

YES

NO

### Mealtimes

Does the person knock items over at the table?

YES

NO

Does the person consistently leave food on their plate?

YES

NO

Does the person search for objects with hands?

YES

NO

## Identifying Sight Loss Checklist

### Interactions

Does the person repeatedly clean their glasses or ask for them to be cleaned?

YES

NO

Does the person move objects close to their face or move their face close to objects?

YES

NO

Does the person get startled when approached unexpectedly?

YES

NO

Does the person dislike or avoid going out on a sunny day?

YES

NO

- Watch the DVD attached for more information

**If you, or the person you are caring for, are having difficulty in any of these areas you should get your eye sight checked by an optician.**

## Handy hints for visiting the optician

- ◉ Let the optician know that you have a learning disability
- ◉ Take a list of your medication
- ◉ Take your glasses with you
- ◉ If there is a family history of eye problems let the optician know
- ◉ Take this leaflet and checklist with you



## Donate to RNIB

We need you to help fund our vital services for blind and partially sighted people in the UK.

Right now we can only reach one in three of the people who need our help most. By making a single donation or a regular donation, you can help us reach more.

A third of our vital work helping people with sight loss is only possible thanks to people continuing their support through a legacy gift.

Visit our donation pages on: [www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk) to find out how to donate and how this helps.

Thank you for your support.

## **RNIB UK Visual Impairment and Learning Disability Services provide:**

- ◉ Training for the public and professionals (including optometrists)
- ◉ Information services
- ◉ Vision and environmental assessment
- ◉ Specialist rehabilitation services
- ◉ A broad range of direct support and care services for people with learning disability and confirmed or suspected sight loss
- ◉ Assessment linked to personalised budgets (SDS)

### **For more information:**

Telephone: 0141 772 5588

E-mail: [learningdisability@rnib.org.uk](mailto:learningdisability@rnib.org.uk)

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