

Advice for staff involved with administering the Coronavirus vaccine to blind and partially sighted people

GP clinics, Pharmacies and Vaccine Centres

RNIB and Guide Dogs in Northern Ireland, have put together some helpful suggestions about how to assist people with sight loss who are receiving the Covid-19 vaccine. This does not replace or override general guidance or policies, but it is intended to support those who come in to contact with people with sight loss.

Sight loss is more common than you think

Some of those who are blind and partially sighted may already be known by various agencies. For example, they may be familiar to their GP practice. There are also people in the community whose sight loss is not recorded. While some people with sight impairment can be easily recognised: they may use a cane which can vary in size and colour, wear dark glasses, have a guide dog, carry an identification card, or wear a badge, and/or lanyard. However, this may not always be the case. Some people may not use a visible aid. Therefore, we all have a responsibility to be aware that a person could have a visual impairment that is not immediately obvious.

If you are unsure, just ask the person you are supporting if they have any challenges due to poor eyesight.

Key recommendations

- Ensure information sent to a visually impaired person is available in an accessible format for example; large print, braille.
- Provide clear information on the location of the vaccine centre for example, public transport options.
- Make sure the venue has clear signage and good levels of lighting
- Provide all patient information regarding the vaccine and instructions about the vaccination process, in an accessible format.
- Ensure staff are trained to provide support to people with sight loss, including guiding when necessary.

Providing information in the correct format

If you are providing written information, ask the vision impaired person what format they would like this information provided in; large print, braille, audio, email. The following transcription services can help and are still operating during the pandemic:

- Ecom (<http://www.ecomcommunications.co.uk>)
- a2i (<https://a2i.co.uk>)

Other transcription companies are available and many of these are listed at UKAAF (www.ukaaf.org/partners/)

Information about the location of the vaccine centre

The following information will help someone with sight loss when planning their visit to the centre:

- To reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19, individuals will travel, if possible, by private transport. However, for some people living with sight loss this is not an option. In such cases information on public transport options closest to the centre will be of use. (appointments after 9.30am are likely to be preferred).
- Information about your location and accessible entrance points (can someone be met outside the venue by a staff member?).
- What to expect when arriving at the vaccination venue.

- Staff should be aware that many visitors will have conditions or disabilities that mean they may need further support when at the centre, and that all centres have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities.
- Brief staff on the different types of assistance dogs to expect and different mobility canes.
- Any issues relating to access for someone accompanied by their guide dog should be discussed with the guide dog owner and any reasonable adjustment requirements should be followed.

Providing assistance at the vaccine centre

The most important point to remember is to use clear verbal communication:

- Identify yourself – always introduce yourself and inform the person of your name and job title.
- Always ask the person if they would like any assistance or help.
- Ask them what their name is.
- Continue to use normal body language. This will positively affect the tone of your voice and provide extra information to the person who is vision impaired.
- Don't be afraid to use everyday language.
- Never channel conversation through a third person. Always speak directly to the vision impaired person.
- When verbally guiding a person, ask them if they would like you to walk ahead of them, behind or on their left or right (2 metres distance). Their preference may allow them to use any remaining vision.

- Provide clear instructions when describing a route or when you would like the person to change direction e.g. Left and Right.
- You may wish to use the 'clock face technique' when describing the environment in front of the person, for example, 'directly in front of you at 12 o'clock is the main entrance, to your right at 3 o'clock is a table. On your left at 9 o'clock is the toilet door'.
- Let the person know before you carry out any procedure that involves physical contact, for example, 'I'm going to touch your left arm' or 'I need you to roll up your left sleeve', 'Can I help you with that?'
- It is important to make someone with sight loss aware of the environment they are in. Particularly when discussing personal information or administering any medical procedure, particularly in an open area where other people are present.
- When walking always let the person know about differences in the floor surface, such as steps, and any changes in surface such as moving from tiles to a carpeted area.
- Inform the person of any obstacles near them that could be trip hazards or that they could accidentally bump into, for example, furniture.
- Remember that social distancing is almost impossible for blind and partially sighted people. They are likely to struggle with queuing systems, locating hand sanitising stations and designated seating areas and recognising and responding to floor indicators, temporary barriers and signage.
- Never leave a conversation with a person without saying so. It's really important that they know when you have left them and that they know what to do next once you have gone.
- If the individual is required to wait in the venue for a period after their vaccination in case of an adverse reaction, please ensure that they are assisted to locate any waiting area or suitable seating.
- Remember to alert them when this waiting period has ended and assist them to leave, if necessary. This is particularly important if their route of exit will differ from the route of entry.
- Ensure that any instructions on next steps and/or aftercare, are in an accessible format.
- Finally, consider asking how the experience was for them or if there is anything that could have been done differently. If there is, this could not only benefit you, but also the next person with sight loss for whom you provide assistance.

For further information please see the **Guidance (bit.ly/3aN9vOz)** on social distancing developed by RNIB and Guide Dogs, in partnership with Public Health Agency, Health and Social Care Board and Health Trust Sensory Support Teams.

Providing sighted guiding assistance

“Staying safe outside your home” (<https://bit.ly/3bvPYa>) guidance allows for support from family or friends in the same household, or from their support bubble, or by family and friends that don’t live in the same household or support bubble. If that’s not possible, it allows support by volunteers or staff from organisations, such as hospitals or similar settings. This includes sighted guiding.

Sighted guiding provides support for someone whose sight is not sufficient to safely negotiate, an unfamiliar environment. Ordinarily it involves the person being guided keeping light contact with a guider’s elbow, standing alongside and slightly behind to the left or right, depending on personal preference. While moving, the guider will also talk to the person being guided to provide additional information about any immediate hazards.

Government guidance is written so that if the government reimpose restrictions as part of a local lockdown, it will still be applicable to allow sighted guiding to continue while reducing the risk as much as possible. Guidance provided by the governments in the UK provides for sighted guiding to take place, including at the highest levels of lockdown and most restrictive tiers.

Staff or volunteers providing sighted guiding support should first follow their organisation’s policies and guidance in doing so. More information can be found on the Guide Dogs website.

Further information

Guide Dogs:

guidedogs.org.uk/covid19

Guide Dogs information line:

0800 781 1444

RNIB:

rnib.org.uk/coronavirus-updates

RNIB Helpline:

0303 123 9999

Sight Advice FAQ:

sightadvicefaq.org.uk



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