



supporting blind and
partially sighted people

Sight problems

Changing the way we think about blindness

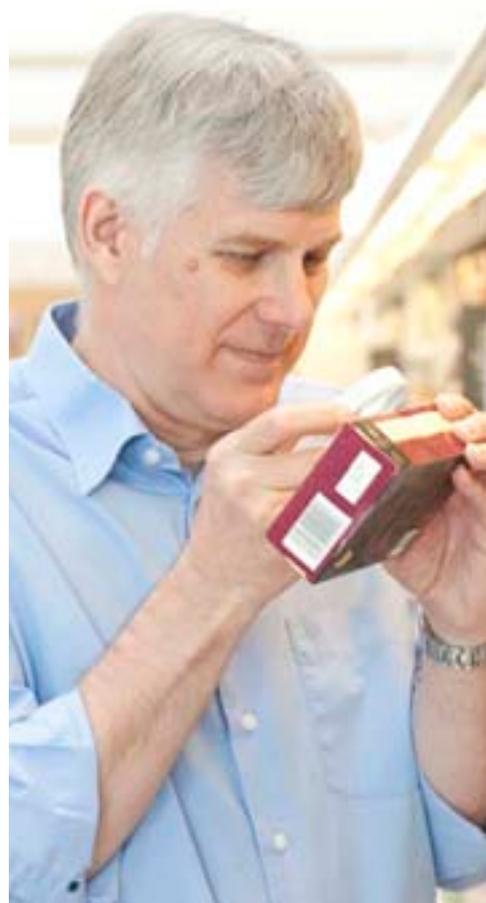
How this guide can help you

This guide provides answers to some of the first questions we all have about sight loss. What are the causes of sight problems? What can blind people see? How do people get around or read?

Sight loss can affect anyone, and each person's experience is individual to them – it is not the same for everyone.

Many people with sight problems lead full and independent lives. Some may need assistance with certain tasks and may have to adapt their daily lives, although this is possible and very often achieved with success. There is also help available from organisations such as Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB).

By providing facts and information, this guide aims to change the way we think about “blindness”.



The information in this guide

The statistics used in this guide come from the following research:

- “Sight loss UK 2013: the latest evidence” – available to download from www.rnib.org.uk/aboutus/research
- “Blind and partially sighted adults in Britain: The RNIB survey”, Bruce et al, 1991 – available from the RNIB Helpline on 0303 123 9999.
- “Functionality and the needs of blind and partially-sighted adults in the UK: a survey”, Pey et al, 2007 – available to download from www.guidedogs.org.uk
- Additional facts and figures on sight loss in the UK can be found at rnib.org.uk/statistics

Further information on any of the issues covered is available from the RNIB Helpline on 0303 123 9999 or by visiting rnib.org.uk

What does “sight problems” mean?

When we say “people with sight problems”, we are describing the full range of people who have uncorrectable sight loss. Sight loss is one of the commonest causes of disability in the UK, and is associated with old age more than any other. The older you become, the more likely you are to have a sight problem. The most severe sight problems can lead to someone being “blind” or “partially sighted”.

Specialist eye doctors (ophthalmologists) decide if someone can be registered as “severely sight impaired/blind” or “sight impaired/partially sighted” with their local social services department.

- A person can register as blind if they can see only the top letter of the optician’s eye test chart from three metres or less. If they can see the top letter from further away but their visual field is restricted, they may also be eligible for registration.
- A person can register as partially sighted if they can see only the top letter of the eye test chart from six metres or less. If they can read the next three lines but their field of vision is limited, they may also be eligible for registration.

Registration can make it easier to take advantage of a range of special services, equipment and advice provided by social services and voluntary organisations, and to qualify for certain benefits. However, many people who are eligible do not register, either because they are unaware of these benefits, or because they don’t want to.



Fact file

It is estimated that there are almost two million people in the UK with a sight problem. Of these, around 360,000 are registered as blind or partially sighted. Of the registered blind and partially sighted people, one third are reported to have an additional disability. A variety of people also have sight problems which are correctable, such as cataracts.

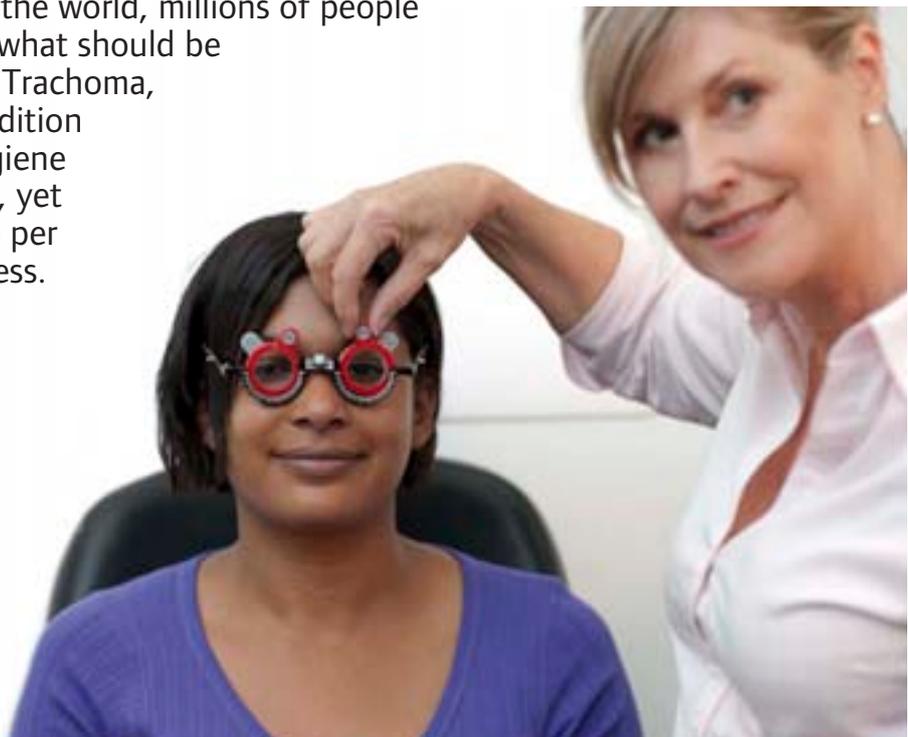
What are the common causes of sight problems?

Some people will be affected by a sight problem from birth, whilst others may inherit an eye condition, such as retinitis pigmentosa, that gets gradually worse as they get older. Some people may lose their sight as the result of an accident, whilst illness can lead to conditions such as diabetic retinopathy.

Some ethnic groups are at a high risk of acquiring certain eye conditions. For example, people of African-Caribbean origin are particularly susceptible to glaucoma.

Age-related eye conditions are the most common cause of sight loss in the UK. The vast majority of people with sight problems in the UK are aged sixty-five or over. Their eyesight is affected by conditions such as macular degeneration or cataracts.

In the poorer countries of the world, millions of people suffer from the effects of what should be easily controlled diseases. Trachoma, for instance, is an eye condition simply caused by poor hygiene and inadequate sanitation, yet it is responsible for fifteen per cent of the world's blindness.



How can sight problems be prevented?

Many thousands of people in the UK have an eye disease but don't know it. An eye test every two years can help identify potentially life-threatening illness and detect eye conditions before sight is affected. By the time your vision starts to get worse, it could be too late to save your sight. You can also keep your eyes healthy by not smoking, eating a well-balanced diet and protecting your eyes from DIY accidents and sunlight.

What can people with sight problems see?

Being blind does not always mean that a person is living in total darkness. Many blind people and the majority of partially sighted people can recognise a friend at arm's length.

Other people will be affected by eye conditions in different ways: some will have no central vision or no vision to the sides; others may see a patchwork of blank and defined areas, or else everything may be seen as a vague blur.

The pictures on this page give some idea of what people may see, but it should be remembered that people are affected by eye conditions in different ways. You should not assume that you know what someone can see simply because you know what eye condition they have.



Glaucoma can result in tunnel vision, where all side vision is lost and only central vision remains.



Diabetic retinopathy can cause blurred and patchy vision.



Macular degeneration can lead to a loss of central vision whilst side vision remains.

Fact file

Being blind does not always mean living in total darkness. You might think that if you shut your eyes you are temporarily blind. However, if with your eyes shut you were to turn your head towards a window, you would detect a minimal perception of light. Only about four per cent of people who are blind have no light perception at all.

Can it be difficult getting around?

Many people with sight problems get around independently. They may use their remaining vision and/or a mobility aid, such as a white cane or a guide dog. Other people may need the assistance of someone with sight. Some people could also have additional disabilities, which make it difficult to get around.

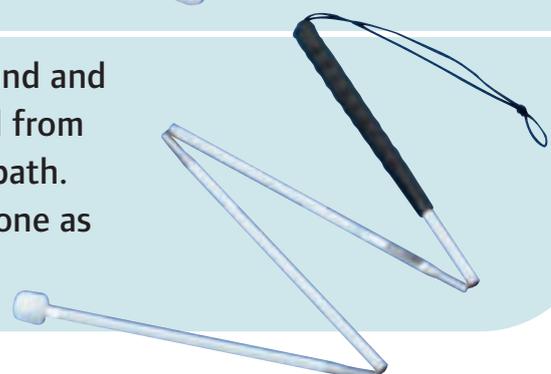
In the UK around two-thirds of blind and partially sighted people use a white cane. If someone wishes to use a long, or guide cane, training is available to teach them how to use it and also to help them learn journeys and routes that they often take.

Around 5,000 people use guide dogs. Guide dogs are trained to lead their owners around obstructions and stop at hazards such as kerbs. Contrary to what some people think, guide dogs cannot read street signs and they do not know when to get off the bus. Guide dog users receive training from the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association.



Fact file

Canes are an essential mobility aid for many blind and partially sighted people. Long canes are moved from side to side to identify obstacles in a person's path. Symbol canes are used purely to identify someone as having a sight problem.



What can help people to get around safely?

In a familiar place, a person with sight problems will often be able to get around safely by using their memory of the surroundings and any remaining sight they have.

If you visit somebody in their home or at their place of work, remember not to move things around or leave things in places that could cause an accident. This also applies if somebody with a sight problem is visiting you.

The way public areas, buildings and public transport are planned is also very important. Certain design features can help enormously such as:

- well-positioned, easy to read signage, ideally with a tactile or braille element
- clear reliable announcements of stops on public transport
- tactile paving – paving slabs with raised bumps – which warns people of hazards, such as road crossings.



Fact file

Badly parked cars; wheelie bins in the middle of the pavement; bicycles lying outside shops and trees and plants overhanging the pavement are examples of potential hazards to people with sight problems that are caused by the thoughtlessness of others.

Products to make life easier

RNIB have over 1,000 products and publications that help to make life easier for people with sight problems. For more information or to order a catalogue contact the RNIB Helpline on 0303 123 9999. You can also buy products online at rnib.org.uk/shop

Learning braille

This keyring can make the shapes of braille characters. Helpful to anyone learning to read braille.



Board games

Popular games such as Snakes and Ladders have been adapted so that they can be played by both sight and touch.



Books and music

This easy-to-use DAISY player is ideal for making the most of talking books, including reference books, and for listening to music CDs. For details of the full range available, order a copy of "Choosing your DAISY audio book player".



Money

A range of coin holders are available, helping people store and distinguish their cash.



Telling the time

A range of talking, tactile and easy-to-see clocks and watches are available, including this radio-controlled talking calendar clock.



In the kitchen

The liquid level indicator emits either a tone or vibration when the cup is full, and is just one of a range of products designed to help in the kitchen.



Communicating

This talking mobile phone with well-spaced tactile buttons makes it easy to make and receive phone calls and text messages. It is just one of many mobile options available.



Keeping fit

Whether walking or running this talking pedometer announces the steps taken, distance travelled and calories burnt all at the touch of a button.



How do people with sight problems read?

The ability to read written information is crucial to our independence and ability to do everyday things such as shop or travel. However, information is often not available to people with sight problems in a way that they can read it.

Many blind and partially sighted people can read ordinary, printed information if it is well designed. Text of a good size (such as 14 point print, as in this guide), and good contrast between the colour of the text and the background can help. Some people use what is known as large print, which can be any size from 16 point upwards.

Magnifiers are also used to make print and other objects big enough to read. They range from hand-held magnifiers to electronic low-vision devices, which can enlarge print and pictures onto a screen.

There are systems of reading by touch such as braille. There are around 20,000 people who use braille regularly, and many more make use of braille labelling on signs, in lifts and on packaging. However, it is unusual for people losing their sight in later life to learn the system.

Audio CDs and DAISY audio CDs are popular methods of accessing information, and the internet is being used more frequently by those with the ability to use a computer.



Fact file

There are around 40,000 members of the RNIB Talking Book Service – a service that distributes audio books to its members. These books are now distributed in cutting-edge DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System) audio format. 8,000 titles are sent out every day and members read one book a week on average, which is approximately twelve hours of listening.

How can computers help?

An increasing number of blind and partially sighted people have access to computers either in the workplace or at home. People with sight problems can obtain information from a computer in different ways:

- special software programs and closed circuit televisions (CCTVs) enlarge the text on a screen until it is large enough to be read
- computerised speech systems read text directly from the screen to the user
- text on screen can be converted into braille that is displayed directly onto a specially adapted keyboard and read by touch.

These methods can also be used to access the huge amount of information available on the internet. If web pages are well designed, people with sight problems can read them. For example, images or pictures should have a text description attached.

Information on how a web page should be designed is available on the RNIB website at rnib.org.uk



Fact file

Audio description can help people with sight problems enjoy television, videos, DVDs, cinema or the theatre. It describes what is happening when there is no dialogue, so that people with sight problems can follow the action.

Should I offer help?

If you see somebody with a sight problem who you think may need help, then ask. Let them tell you what kind of help they need. It may be that they need help crossing the road or finding the train station. If your help is needed, keep a few common sense things in mind:

- Introduce yourself and make sure the person knows you are speaking to them.
- Talk directly to them and not through a third party.
- If you are going to guide them, let them take your arm, don't grab theirs.
- 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.
- 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.
- Don't walk away without saying you are leaving.



Crossing the road

Many people with sight problems leave their home rarely, if at all. One of the main reasons for this is fear of crossing the road. Good design features such as tactile paving at crossings and visual, audible and tactile signals telling you when to cross, are all helpful but are not always available. If you see somebody looking as if they could use a little assistance crossing the road, why not ask if you can help?

What other support can I offer?

Many of the organisations that supply vital services for people with sight problems rely heavily on the work of volunteers to help them provide these services.

Local voluntary organisations could use your help in numerous ways including:

- helping people to and from clubs and resource centres
- visiting people in their own homes and helping them with everyday tasks such as cooking and cleaning
- recording and delivering local talking newspapers.

RNIB could also use your help. For example, to help us make the most of our resources you could help us with:

- research projects
- organising fundraising events
- accompanying people on day trips.

For more information on how giving a little of your time could make a real difference to the lives of people with sight problems, contact the volunteer team on 0845 603 0575.



Helping us to help others

Every day another 100 people will start to lose their sight. Your support helps us rebuild lives devastated by sight loss. Call 0845 345 0054 today, to find out how you can make a real difference.

What organisations offer help?

There are many voluntary organisations of and for blind and partially sighted people. These are mainly charities relying on donations from the general public to pay for the work they do. Organisations such as RNIB provide a range of services across the UK for people of all ages, their families and friends.

Throughout the UK there are local societies providing services and help to people with a sight problem in their area.

Some organisations will concentrate on specific activities, such as British Blind Sport, whilst others provide services for people with specific eye conditions, such as the Macular Disease Society, or for specific ethnic groups, such as the Association of Blind Asians.

Certain financial benefits are available from Government to help with the additional costs of living with a disability. Local social services are also available to help with things like mobility training and home adaptations.



Sightline directory

Having quick and easy access to national and local organisations for blind and partially sighted people is vital to maintaining the independence of people with sight loss. Sightline directory lists the people, organisations and services who provide support – all in one place online. Visit sightlinedirectory.org.uk

How does RNIB help?

Our pioneering work helps anyone with a sight problem – not just with braille, talking books and computer training, but with imaginative and practical solutions to everyday challenges.

RNIB is the UK's leading charity helping anyone with a sight problem. Our staff and volunteers work to empower blind and partially sighted people of all ages and remove the barriers they face, as well as preventing sight loss by:

- influencing policy makers through our campaign work
- providing expertise and support services, Talking Books and a wide range of products and training
- encouraging direct involvement of blind and partially sighted people in RNIB's work via our membership scheme.

Further information on the services that we provide and the work that we do is available from the RNIB Helpline or by visiting our website at rnib.org.uk



Join RNIB today

RNIB is the largest organisation in the UK for people with sight problems. Our membership scheme brings people with sight problems, their families, friends and carers, closer to the local and national services available to help them. It also gives members a say in the services RNIB provide and how we deliver them. To become a member of RNIB today, simply call us on 0303 1234 555.

RNIB

105 Judd Street
London WC1H 9NE
t: 020 7388 1266

RNIB Cymru

Trident Court
East Moors Road
Cardiff CF24 5TD
t: 029 2045 0440

**RNIB Northern
Ireland**

40 Linenhall Street
Belfast BT2 8BA
t: 028 9032 9373

RNIB Scotland

12-14 Hillside
Crescent
Edinburgh EH7 5EA
t: 0131 652 3140

For the latest information from RNIB visit rnib.org.uk

RNIB Helpline**0303 123 9999****helpline@rnib.org.uk**

The RNIB 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.

We are ready to answer your call Monday to Friday 8.45am to 5.30pm. Outside these times leave us a message and we'll get back to you as soon as possible.

This guide is available in print, braille and on audio CD by contacting the RNIB Helpline on 0303 123 9999.