

Low Vision



What is Low Vision?

Low vision is a term commonly used to mean partial sight or a visual impairment, i.e., reduced visual acuity, which cannot be adequately corrected with medical, surgical or optical correction.

Defining Low Vision

The most familiar test of spatial vision is the resolution test of Snellen acuity. It is performed by optometrists/opticians and it involves recognising and reading the smallest possible letters at a maximum contrast. 'Normal' performance is taken as a visual acuity level of 6/6 (100% vision with no loss). The test is in common usage, it is easily performed and the result is described as a single value.

Whilst 6/6 represents 100% visual functioning with no loss, 6/9 represents a visual functioning of 91%, with a 9% loss of vision, 6/18 represents a visual functioning of 70%, with a 30% loss of vision, 6/24 represents a visual functioning of 59%, with a 41% loss of vision, and so on.

The functional definitions are:

Severely Sight

'so blind as to be unable to perform any work **Impaired** for which eyesight is essential'

To be registered as severely visually impaired, a visual acuity of 3/60 or worse is necessary – or 6/60 or worse with markedly restricted fields

Sight Impaired

'substantially and permanently disabled by defective vision caused by congenital defect, illness or injury'

To be registered as visually impaired, a visual acuity of 3/60 to 6/60 is necessary or 6/24 or worse with moderate field restriction or 6/18 or better with gross field defect

It is difficult to apply these definitions to young children because of the nature of the Snellen chart test. Therefore, it is recommended that they are registered as partially sighted until the age of 4 years (unless obviously totally blind), when they can be tested with optimum refractive correction and registered in the same way as adults. Only an Ophthalmologist can register a child as severely sight impaired or sight impaired .

Low vision is a bilateral impairment, and the definition does not include people who have monocular vision, so they are rarely considered in this category.

Low vision can range from moderate vision impairment to total blindness, and the causes are many and varied. It is often a loss of sharpness when viewing an object, but it may present as a loss of the field of vision, light sensitivity, distorted vision or loss of contrast.

Common Visual Disturbances and Disorders

Loss of Acuity or Fluctuating Vision: This may include a dimness of vision, haziness or foggy vision.

Photophobia: Sensitivity to light is the prime factor of this condition, recovery from glare is slow and adaptation to light is difficult.

Field Defects: With this condition, there is no vision in particular areas of the visual field. Common losses include general contraction or depression (objects in the periphery are not seen), hemianopsia (the right half, left half, upper half, or lower half of the visual field is missing), and scotoma (patches missing from the visual field)

Low vision clinics and services may be able to help. They may be able to provide aids (optical and non-optical) to fully utilise the remaining vision to its full potential.

Magnifiers are in common use – there are many types, such as spectacle mounted, hand held or on stands, and they come in many shapes and sizes. The strength of different magnifiers is expressed as a power, eg x1.5 is about the weakest and x8 is powerful for close up work. The lower the magnification level, the larger the lens will be, so the higher the strength of magnifier, the smaller the field of view will be.

Lighting is also important, and a task lamp can be a very useful non-optical aid. For some conditions, a fluorescent lamp will be the best, but an ordinary type bulb, or a daylight bulb may be best suited for others.

Disclaimer: Information sheets have been produced to provide information and advice for the parents of visually impaired children. Changes may occur in theories and legislation, however, the information sheets have been written in good faith, as a general guidance tool. If you have any questions with regard to issues raised by the information sheet, please contact the National Blind Children's Society, National Family Support and Information Manager.