

Living with Low Vision

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Living with low vision

Many people at some time in their life will experience a problem with their eyesight. If you start to notice your vision changing or you have any concerns about your eyesight, consult your eye health professional.

Low vision is sight loss, reduced vision or vision loss that cannot be corrected or improved by glasses, medicine or surgery and makes everyday tasks difficult.

If you have low vision, you may:

- have difficulty reading and writing
- have a loss of depth perception, making it difficult (for example) to identify if a step is high or low
- have less contrast sensitivity, which makes it hard to see a curb, steps, a hole in the pavement or pale or coloured print
- have problems seeing at distance, making it difficult to determine whether pedestrian crossing signals are on or off, or see street name signs
- see spots that block your central vision, which make it hard to identify landmarks or notice obstacles
- have a loss of visual field, which results in reduced peripheral vision; this makes it difficult to move around without bumping into things (such as coffee tables or open cupboard doors)
- not be able to see and identify faces, which can make communication more difficult.

Some health conditions that may cause blindness do not have any symptoms early on, may only affect one eye and may not always be

easily detectable except through an eye examination. Regular eye examinations are the best way to prevent a vision impairment. Have frequent eye examinations if you have a family history of eye disease or a medical condition such as diabetes or hypertension.

If you have low vision, it is quite usual to find that your vision changes from time to time. This may depend on things like the weather, your level of tiredness, being in an unfamiliar place, and having lots of different things to think about at once.

Learning you have vision loss

On first learning that you have some vision loss, you can take the following steps.

- Learn as much as possible about the cause and effect of the eye condition you have.
- Be prepared to make changes and do things in a different way.
- Set realistic goals about learning to cope with change.
- Talk to other people with similar visual impairments.
- Tell your family/whānau if you have a hereditary condition.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help or advice.
- Keep active, learn new skills and maintain family and other social activities.

Losing vision does not have to mean giving up your usual activities, but it can mean finding new ways of doing them.

If you have low vision and want to continue to do the same things you have always done, you may need to think about things a bit differently, and make some changes.

Managing your daily tasks

Make things brighter and bigger

Lighting

If you have low vision good lighting is really important. Direct light on a task improves contrast. For reading, writing or other detailed tasks, use direct lighting from an adjustable lamp positioned close by. Install extra lights over work surfaces.

Make sure stairs, bathrooms, the kitchen bench and other areas for activity are well lit. Some energy-efficient bulbs may not be ideal, particularly in hallways and bathrooms, especially if they take some time to fully light an area.

You may find a torch useful for going out at night, finding items in dark cupboards or reading in poorly lit areas. Wearing a headlamp torch can be particularly useful when you are working in the kitchen.

Use a reading lamp indoors, even during the day.

More information about lighting can be found at the New Zealand Association of Optometrists' website www.nzao.co.nz/sites/default/files/LightingAdvice.pdf and Sight Loss Services www.sightloss-services.com

Use contrast

Strong contrasts can help you to see more easily.

For example, pour coffee into white cups and put white plates on dark place mats. Have a dark chopping board and a light one. Chop

dark items (eg, meat) on the light board and light items (eg, onion) on the dark board.

When writing, use thick roller-ball pens on white paper. Fine black felt pens may also be suitable if they don't soak into the paper too much.

Use bright, contrasting labels (eg, white on a dark surface), dark felt pens, and fluoro or raised tactile paint, bump stickers or locator dots to label the dials of your stove, microwave, dishwasher, washing machine and dryer, and on remote controls. Use a white-out corrector pen (eg, Twink) to mark a dark background.

Contrast can be tactile as well as visual. For example, you can use a rubber band to help you know the difference between similar containers, for example, shampoo and conditioner.

Float a coloured sponge in the bath to help you see the waterline.

Paint or tape contrasting strips along the edge of steps and pathways. Always use non-slip paint or tape.

Paint handrails, door handles and door surrounds contrasting colours, so that they stand out rather than blend in.

Highlight light switches, power outlets and keyholes with contrasting tape or paint. A small piece directly below the switch or keyhole is often enough. Or ask an electrician to fit a contrasting switch and surround.

Control glare

Wear sunglasses, or ones that fit over your glasses (fitovers) or clip-on sunglasses. A wide-brimmed hat or visor is another good way of controlling glare and light sensitivity. Tinted glasses lens can help, particularly with glare from indoor lights.

Enlarge

Sit closer to the television, and at the front at concerts, presentations and performances.

Many smartphones, tablets, e-readers and computers have features that can increase text size and contrast. Some have a text-to-speech feature, allowing you to hear the text spoken rather than read it, and most have back lighting.

On some computers, you can enlarge fonts and illustrations by pressing the 'CTRL' and '+' keys.

Use a photocopier to enlarge timetables, recipes, address books, menus, etc.

Re-organise

Eliminate hazards

Make sure your home is safe. Secure mats and trip hazards. Make sure everything has a place, so you can easily find it.

Be organised

- Thinking ahead and being organised can make a big difference.
- Have designated spots for important items like your keys and wallet.
- Keep work spaces clear. Have a place for everything, and put things back in their place. Close cupboard doors and make sure floors remain clear.
- Organise your fridge and pantry consistently, grouping similar foods together.
- Before you travel, get any forms you'll need (eg, departure cards or visa applications) and fill them out at home.

- Ask your pharmacy about pre-packaging medication into blister packs with the right dose for the right time of the day. Also available are talking thermometers.

If you have vision-related difficulties with any tasks relating to your health talk to your doctor or practice nurse about getting specialist assistance. Lighting, contrast, labelling, magnification or a talking glucometer to take blood sugar readings may help.

Going out

An important part of living with low vision is maintaining normal family/whānau, social, leisure and work activity. When you go out, plan, and think ahead and allow plenty of time. Be prepared by visualising the route you will take and anticipating where you might experience difficulties.

Restaurants can send menus to you in advance, or you can look at them online before you go.

When you are out and about, it may help you to know that there is a raised bump on the number 5 of some keypads (eg, on EFTPOS machines). The odd numbers 1, 3, 7 and 9 form an X shape around the 5, while the even numbers 2, 4, 6 and 8 form a +.

Low-vision aids and devices

Optical aids and devices include:

- hand and stand magnifiers
- illuminated magnifiers
- spectacle-mounted magnifiers
- telescopic lenses for both near and far distances
- glare visors and glasses fitovers.

Be aware that many magnifiers are designed for craft or workshop use, rather than for people with low vision.

Inexpensive non-optical aids and devices can help you with routine daily activities. These include:

- large-print cookbooks, books, talking books and large numbered playing cards
- large-numbered clocks, telephones and watches
- liquid level indicators, which help you know when a cup is nearly full
- different coloured measuring cups and spoons
- electronic labellers that record and play back a spoken descriptive 'label' on, for example, food in the freezer
- electronic 'talking' clocks, kitchen timers, kitchen scales, bathroom scales, watches, calculators, measuring jugs, thermometers, blood pressure meters and even pill bottles
- large felt-tip pens and wide-lined paper
- wallets that separate different money denominations into different pockets
- colour-coded pill boxes
- electronic organisers that make use of voice recording
- magnifying mirrors, with or without lighting.

More information is available in *The New Zealand Low Vision Handbook. A beginner's guide to living with sight loss:*

www.retina.org.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/19086/Your_Blue_Book.pdf

Adaptive technology

There is a range of computerised or electronic equipment that can help you with low vision. For example:

- electronic magnifiers – from small hand-held magnifiers to desktop computers that can scan printed information and magnify it or read out what is on the screen
- computer software that magnifies not just font size but everything on a computer screen
- large-print keyboard
- speech recognition software
- talking GPS (a navigation system that may be a device or an app for your phone).

Smartphones and tablets have a range of built-in functions, and offer a range of apps (programmes), that are useful for people with low vision. For example, some smartphones have a voice recognition system that allows a user to check the weather, their email or their calendar without having to navigate a series of icons or buttons.

Some apps use your device's camera and light source to magnify and illuminate text. This is a less expensive (although less powerful) alternative to an electronic magnifier.

Other apps provide voice-guided directions for you as you travel; for example, street names.

If you have a smartphone, browse your Apple or Android app store online to find out about the pricing and availability of these apps.

New products are constantly being developed, and existing products improved.

If you need adaptive technology to engage in work or study, Workbridge may be able to provide you with assistance (either equipment or training).

Workbridge is a specialist employment service for people with all types of disability, injury or illness:

<http://workbridgeincorporated.virtuozzo.co.nz/?page=1>

Many websites sell low-vision aids and devices. For example, the Blind Foundation has an online shop:

<https://blindfoundation.org.nz/how-we-can-help/shop/>

Do not buy an optical aid unless it has been professionally prescribed for you, and trial it before you buy it. Training can be very important to ensure you get the best use from the device. You may need several aids to help you with different tasks. If you already wear glasses you may need your prescription incorporated into a low vision aid.

Low vision assessment and rehabilitation

Low-vision rehabilitation may include:

- support to help you understand the cause and effect of your vision loss and set realistic goals
- training in using different eye movement techniques for locating objects or reading
- training in the use of low-vision aids (such as how best to hold a hand magnifier, or use a writing frame and felt-tip pen)
- training in using different senses (touch and hearing) to supplement visual information
- training in adapting your environment, such as finding or setting up the best lighting
- training in mobility, to help you move around unfamiliar places safely
- workplace modification and/or training
- meeting school requirements and assistance with equipment.

Rehabilitation can reduce the impact of low vision on your daily activities, and teach you how to make use of your remaining vision more effectively.

The sooner you seek help, the sooner you can use vision rehabilitation to stay active. It can be frightening to learn that you have some vision loss, and that your sight is unlikely to get better.

It is important for you to recognise any strong feelings you have (such as anger or frustration), and get help working through them.

Some optometrists offer rehabilitation services. The New Zealand Association of Optometrists maintains a list of optometrists who offer low-vision rehabilitation.

See www.nzao.co.nz/low-vision-guide or ask your local optometrist whether they can help.

They will help you to better understand your vision impairment and advise you on how to make the most of your remaining sight.

The University of Auckland Optometry School offers low vision rehabilitation and some hospital eye departments have low vision clinics (Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch). You need a referral from either your GP, an eye health professional or the Blind Foundation to use the clinics.

The vision rehabilitation professional can talk with you about the activities you are having difficulty with, test your remaining vision to understand your sight limitations, provide information and advice, prescribe the visual aid most suitable to your requirements, trial vision devices and aids to find out which one is best for you, and provide you with training on how to use them.

It can be helpful for you to take a family/whānau member or friend with you to the appointment. You might also like to take notes or a voice recording to refer to later.

Support and resources

Support services

Blind Foundation

The Blind Foundation offers services to people with severe vision loss, including counselling, orientation and mobility services, adaptive daily living services, adaptive technology and employment support. Eligibility criteria apply (find out more about eligibility at the Foundation's website: <https://blindfoundation.org.nz/how-we-can-help/register/registration-criteria/>).

Kāpō Māori Aotearoa (Ngāti Kāpō)

Kāpō Māori Aotearoa delivers specialist Kāpō Māori and Whānau Services to access services offered by the Blind Foundation. Service delivery is in accordance with Te Ao Māori principles and practices and is designed to support kāpō Māori and their whānau to overcome any barriers to access Blind Foundation services.

Peer support

A low-vision support group may provide you with an opportunity to talk to others in a similar situation.

The following organisations may be able to help:

- **Visual Impairment Charitable Trust Aotearoa (NZ):**
www.visualimpairment.org.nz/links
Phone: 0800 206 620
Email: enquiries@visualimpairment.org.nz
- **Parents of Vision Impaired (NZ) Inc:** www.pvi.org.nz
Phone: 027 440 2073 **Email:** david@pvi.org.nz

- **Kāpō Māori Aotearoa New Zealand Inc:** www.kapomaori.com
Phone: 0800 770 990
- **Albinism Trust** www.albinism.org.nz
- **Retina New Zealand Inc:** www.retina.org.nz
Phone: 0800 233 833
Email: retina@retina.org.nz
- **Telefriend:** a peer support service run by the Blind Foundation for people who are blind or have low vision. This is staffed by blind or low-vision volunteers Monday to Friday 1 pm–4 pm, or leave a message
Phone: 0800 100 051
- **Blind Foundation:** www.blindfoundation.org.nz
Phone: 800 243 333
- **Blind Citizens NZ:** www.abcnz.org.nz
Phone: 0800 222 694
Email: enquiries@abcnz.org.nz

Resources

The New Zealand Low Vision Handbook. A beginner's guide to living with sight loss: www.retina.org.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/19086/Your_Blue_Book.pdf

Handy-hints for low vision:

<https://blindfoundation.org.nz/how-we-can-help/community-resources/handy-hints-for-low-vision/>

Ministry of Health's website:

health.govt.nz/your-health/conditions-and-treatments/diseases-and-illnesses/eye-and-vision-problems

New Zealand Association of Optometrists www.nzao.co.nz

Phone: 0800 439 322 **Email:** info@nzao.co.nz

Macular Degeneration New Zealand: www.mdnz.org.nz

Phone: 0800 622 852 **Email:** info@mdnz.org.nz

Glaucoma NZ: www.glaucoma.org.nz

Phone: 0800 452 826 **Email:** admin@glaucoma.org.nz

Diabetes New Zealand: www.diabetes.org.nz/home

Phone: 0800 342 238

BookLink: a free audio book service run by the Blind Foundation

Phone: 0800 24 33 33 **Email:** library@blindfoundation.org.nz

Disability Resource Centres

Phone: 0800 693 342 to connect to your nearest centre or

Email: admin@nzfdic.org.nz

Resources for children and young people

The vision book: My Child, Our Journey – Te Puka Moemoeā:

Tōku Tamaiti, Tō Tātou Huarahi is for parents, caregivers, families and whānau of children and young people who are blind, deafblind

or have low vision. <https://parents.education.govt.nz/essential-information/news-stories/the-vision-book-my-child-our-journey/>

Blind and Low Vision Education Network NZ

Phone: (09) 266 7109 **Email:** info@blennz.school.nz

Low Vision Clinic Information

Low Vision Clinic

Sandy Grant, Low Vision Clinic Coordinator

Ophthalmology Department

Level 1, Building 8, Greenlane Clinical Centre, Auckland

Phone: (09) 307 4949 Extension: 27641

Appointments by referral from your GP or eye health professional

Optometry Vision Rehabilitation Clinic

The University of Auckland Optometry Clinics

Grafton and Tamaki Campus, Auckland

Phone: (09) 923 9909 for appointments

Email: clinics@auckland.ac.nz

Appointments by phone or by referral from your GP or eye health professional. There may be a charge.

Low Vision Clinic

Eye Department

Wellington Hospital, Riddiford Street, Newtown, Wellington

Phone: (04) 385 5999

Appointments by referral from your GP or eye health professional

Burwood Low Vision Clinic

Burwood Outpatients, First floor, Burwood Hospital, Christchurch

Phone: (03) 337 7700

Appointments by referral from your GP or eye health professional can be emailed to: ReferralsLowVision@cdhb.health.nz

Or posted to: Burwood Low Vision Clinic

Burwood Outpatients, Private Bag 4708, Christchurch 8140

Wanganui Low Vision Trust

RNZFB Rooms, 102 Peat Street, Wanganui

Phone: (06) 348 4401

Appointments by referral from your GP or eye health professional



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