



**WESTERN CAPE
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PERSONS WITH
DISABILITIES**
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Focus on...

Visual Impaired

What is Visual Impairment?

The term 'visual impairment' (VI) refers to any condition which interferes with vision, including total blindness.

Blindness versus visual impairment: International definitions of blindness have varied from 'total lack of sight' to functional definitions such as 'those persons who require social services as a result of their vision problems'.

Consequently the term 'vision/visual impairment' has become more generally accepted than the term 'blindness' as it includes a greater range of vision problems.

- (a) Legally blind: - A person is accepted as medically and legally blind when an ophthalmologist or an optometrist certifies that they have less than 10% sight.
- Loss of sight is usually discussed in relation to loss of 'visual field', 'visual acuity' or both.
- (b) Visual field: - Refers to the entire area that a person can see without shifting their head or eyes. Visual field has traditionally been measured in degrees.
- To be legally blind an individual must have displayed a visual field of 20 degrees.
- (c) Visual acuity: - Refers to the clarity of vision with which a person can see. Visual acuity has traditionally been measured as a fraction. Normal visual acuity has been classified as 6 / 6 or 20 / 20 vision.

To be considered legally blind a person must have displayed 6/60 vision or less. This usually means that a person cannot see in either eye, at 6 metres with aids and corrective devices, what a person with normal vision can see at 60 metres.

(Thus, a person may be certified as 'blind' and yet still have quite useful vision. People who have been assessed as being legally blind would not be permitted to hold a car licence; will be eligible to receive the disability pension and eligible to receive special educational assistance.)

- (Total blindness: The inability to recognise objects or contours in any direction or at any distance. Some people who have been considered as being totally blind may however have light perception.)
- Light perception: Refers to the ability to distinguish a strong light approximately one metre away from the eye.
- Residual vision: A person's remaining available vision. At least 80% of people who are blind have some residual vision. These persons rely on large-size print rather than braille.
(Acuity is typically measured by standing 6m away from a Snellen chart and reading its lines of progressively smaller print.)
- Tunnel vision (loss of peripheral vision): the person can e.g. see the speaker but not the features around the speaker.
- Loss of central vision: sees a dark area where the speaker is, sees surrounding features well.
- Blurred vision: as though speaker and features are out of focus.

Causes of visual impairment

Most children in schools for persons with visual impairments have congenital blindness (optical nerve damage, congenital cataracts, serious infections, etc.).

Whether vision impairment has resulted from a congenital or an acquired cause, the major physical

outcome has been damage to one or more of the following:

- the eye itself;
- the muscles of the eye;
- the central nervous system;
- the occipital lobe of the brain (the centre for visual identification);
- the optic nerve which relays information from the eye to the brain

General causes that could lead to vision problems include:

Albinism: is a congenital hereditary condition resulting in partial or total absence of normal pigmentation. The effects of this are unique to each individual, but can result in total blindness. (4 per cent of problems in children can be attributed to this.)

Cataract: This condition results in partial or total opacity of the lens. It is a progressive condition and if left untreated can result in blindness. The condition is primarily hereditary, but can occur to any individual. (15 per cent of blindness in children.)

Detached retina: A condition in which the inner layers of the retina are separated from the pigment epithelium. It can result from accumulation of fluids or blood, the presence of a tumour and severe blows to the head or eye. The condition results in focal distortion of visual images (e.g. a straight line appears curved); blind spots and/or loss of sight on one side.

Glaucoma: This condition occurs when the intra-ocular fluid is unable to continuously drain from the eye and causes wasting of the optic nerve. The resulting increase in pressure within the eye can lead to defects to the visual field and in some cases total blindness.

Retinitis pigmentosa: Due to a genetic defect which results in a non-inflammatory progressive degeneration of the retina. The pigment of the retina begins to disappear, which results in a narrowing of the visual field from the outside and leads to "tunnel vision". A common symptom is night blindness.

Hints when working with visually impaired people

1. Please address me directly and not through my guide or companion.
2. I can walk more easily with you than with a dog or cane. But don't grab my arm or try to propel me; let me take yours. I'll keep a half step behind, to anticipate curbs and steps. Going down stairs I may prefer to hold a railing. When giving me directions, make it plain whether you mean your right or my right.
3. Speak to me when you enter the room and tell me who you are - don't play guessing games. Introduce me to the others, including children. Guide my hand to the arm or back of a chair.
4. For me, doors should be completely closed or wide open - a half-open door is a hazard; so are toys on the floor. warn me of coffee tables and projecting lamp shades - I hate to break things.
5. At dinner time, tell me quietly how things are arranged. perhaps my meat will be at six o'clock, peas at eleven o'clock, potatoes at two.
6. Don't avoid words like "See" - I use them too!! I'm always glad to see you !!
7. I don't want pity. but don't talk about the "wonderful compensations" of blindness - whatever I've learned has been by hard work.
8. I'll discuss blindness with you if you're curious, but it's an old story to me. I have as many other interests as you have.
9. If I am a guest in your house, show me the bathroom, closet, dresser, window and the outlet for my computer. The light switch too; I like to know whether the lights are on.
10. Don't think of me as a blind man, I am a man who happens to be blind.