

Supporting people with sight impairments to participate in group walks

About this guidance

The information in this document covers:

- Different types of sight impairments and common characteristics
- How Walking for Health can benefit people with sight impairments
- How group walks can be made safe and welcoming for people with sight impairments
- How to set up a walk for people with sight impairments

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What is sight impairment and who may be affected?

Sight impairments can affect people's visual acuity (i.e. their ability to see fine detail) and/or their visual field (i.e. how much of an environment the eyes can take in without moving).

According to the Royal National Institute for the Blind, nearly two million people live with sight impairments in the UK. This is predicted to increase due to our ageing population and the growing prevalence of some underlying causes of sight loss e.g. obesity and diabetes.

People may be 'severely sight impaired', with very little (if any) functional sight, or 'sight impaired', with some useful vision that can vary in different environmental conditions. People use varied terms to describe their sight, e.g. 'partially sighted', 'visually impaired', 'blind', and may appreciate opportunities to indicate their preferences to others in a walking group.

A wide range of eye conditions may compromise people's vision, be it at birth or later in life. People will be affected in different ways depending on the nature of the condition, the circumstances of onset and all the other things going on in their lives. What people see is unique to them and may change over time.

Some of the main conditions to be aware of include:

1. **Age-related macular degeneration** – compromises the central field of vision. Although people will usually retain some peripheral vision, fine detail may be difficult.
2. **Glaucoma** – results in a significant reduction in peripheral vision through high pressure in the eye and damage to the optic nerve.
3. **Diabetic retinopathy** – a complication of diabetes that causes obstructive 'floaters' and blurred vision through irreversible damage to the retina.
4. **Cataracts** – the main cause of sight impairment globally. Cataracts can result in blurred vision as the lens becomes increasingly cloudy or misty over time.
5. **Retinitis pigmentosa** – a name given to a diverse group of inherited conditions. Can start with compromised vision in dim light and the dark, and may gradually cause loss of peripheral vision over time, leaving some people with tunnel vision or just light perception.
6. **Homonymous Hemianopia** – experiences of stroke or traumatic brain injury can cause complete loss of one side of the visual field.

It is important to remember that not all sight loss is caused by physical damage to the eye. Cortical vision impairment can occur following damage to the visual centres of the brain i.e. the eyes may function healthily but the brain is unable to interpret what is being seen.

People may have additional conditions to be aware of, such as nystagmus (an involuntary eye ‘wobble’ that can impact on people’s balance), corneal dystrophies (when visual acuity is lost through damage to or a build-up of material that clouds the cornea), hearing loss (e.g. with conditions like Usher’s Syndrome), physical mobility constraints (e.g. amongst people whose sight loss has occurred through head injuries with more wide-ranging impacts), or learning difficulties (at least one in 10 people with a learning disability have significant sight loss, particularly people with conditions such as Down’s Syndrome and cerebral palsy).

People who lose their sight are also at increased risk of experiencing isolation, anxiety and depression, in part because of the qualities of our everyday environments and social interactions.

It is important not to make assumptions about how people’s conditions will affect their sight or the support they will need. Every individual is different and it is best to learn from them regarding their needs, priorities and interests.

How can Walking for Health benefit people with sight impairments?

Due to the physical layout of many of our environments, the onset of sight impairment can compromise people’s independence, sense of autonomy and connection with the world. The uneven terrain and lack of accessible footpaths within rural environments can be problematic, in terms of both ease of movement and the efficacy of mobility aids. However, noise levels, traffic, shared spaces and crowding within urban environments can also prove challenging.

Ensuring that people with sight impairments can participate in their local group walks can therefore promote valuable opportunities to:

- Build confidence through learning to negotiate new environments safely
- Gain a sense of achievement through increasing physical activity levels and skills
- Forge meaningful connections, both with other walkers and with nature
- Immerse oneself in a pleasurable and engaging multisensory setting
- Enhance wider public awareness of life with sight impairment to counter negative attitudes and reduce experiences of stigma or prejudice

How can walks be made safe and welcoming for people with sight impairments?

The first step in supporting someone with sight impairment to join a local group walk is to make it clear that they are welcome to join the group and will be fully supported in the group setting.

Welcoming walkers with sight impairment through your local sight loss charity can be an effective way of making people aware of their local Walking for Health group. Attending a social function at the charity and meeting potential walkers personally can encourage people who feel less confident to walk or join a group.

The second step is to ensure that each sight impaired walker is accompanied by a sighted guide. *N.B. It is the walker's responsibility to arrange a guide to accompany them on the walk. **Walk leaders cannot guide visually impaired walkers while on a walk, as their responsibility is to lead a safe and enjoyable walk for all participants.** The role of the walk leader, in relation to visually impaired walkers, is to recognise and address potential challenges en route, and to ensure people feel welcomed and supported.* Should other walkers wish to train as sighted guides, they should contact their local sight loss charity or the Guide Dogs UK "My Guide" scheme, to explore opportunities for doing so.

The third step is to ask each sight-impaired individual to discuss their specific support needs with their sighted guide, recognising that these may change under different environmental conditions. People may have developed preferred techniques and strategies for walking and guiding, depending on their ability, confidence levels and the terrain. These may include, for example, holding the elbow of their sighted guide, walking with a recreational tether or holding either end of a walking pole, or simply walking next to their guide and relying on verbal prompts. Sighted guides should encourage their walk partner to explain their guiding preferences at the outset, rather than simply applying learnt techniques. An attitude of 'walking together' rather than 'helping' is the best approach.

Some walkers may bring a guide dog along (N.B. Even if your group has a 'no dogs' policy, guide dogs [must be allowed on a walk with their owner](#)). If their guide dog is on a free run (i.e. not on duty), it can be helpful for another member of the group to share in looking after it. This may involve, for example, ensuring any dog mess is picked up and dogs are on leads whenever necessary (e.g. in areas shared with livestock or traffic, or where leads are mandatory). Importantly, always speak to the walker directly, not to their dog.

It is essential to allow sufficient time *before* the walk to understand the needs and priorities of each walker, and *during* the walk to ensure all walkers can participate without feeling

rushed or worried about holding up the group. If you are aware that a new walker with impaired sight is joining the group with their guide, it can be useful to ask them whether they would like to meet earlier to allow more time for this discussion.

When planning each walk, it is important to ensure the initial walk meeting point incorporates a significant and distinctive landmark, as some walkers with sight impairment may be travelling alone and meeting their guide at the meeting point. If possible, avoid regularly changing your meeting point and ideally end the walk at the meeting point where you started.

Key features to be aware of and to point out whilst route planning and guiding include:

1. Obstacles at head or hand height, such as low hanging tree branches, large spiders' webs, overgrown hedges, brambles, nettles, gorse, etc. Walkers can hold up a hand or pole vertically in front of them if they know these are coming to reduce risk of collision.
2. Obstacles underfoot, including uneven ground, tree roots or oversized rocks, puddles, wet leaves, particularly muddy or marshy stretches, or stepping stones across relatively deep or fast-flowing rivers and streams.
3. Other obstacles, such as posts, bollards or parked cars that people might walk into. Stiles can be challenging during countryside walks, particularly if broken, rotten or irregular, and for new walkers. It is important to ensure that walkers have the physical support and description needed to understand the stile shape before putting any weight on it (e.g. diagonal or mirror stiles). Barbed wire or electric fences can be problematic as they are not always easy to identify or avoid.
4. Presence of livestock, particularly for anyone walking with a dog, as these animals are not always immediately obvious (e.g. cows along field boundaries or under trees).
5. Steep or sudden drops, steps and kerbs – people can lose depth perception as their sight changes and so will not necessarily anticipate changes in gradient.
6. Light conditions – some people experience photophobia with sight loss (experiences of pain or discomfort through bright light exposure), whilst others may find dim or low light conditions challenging.
7. Weather conditions – the sound of strong winds or rain, or the dampening effects of snow, can be disorientating through masking sound signals (e.g. echoes) that people may otherwise be using to anticipate approaching obstacles/landmarks.
8. Presence of other people – particularly people moving at speed, be it walkers, runners, cyclists, skateboarders, dogs on leads, mobility scooters, etc.
9. Benches – people who are new to walking or those tackling a new route might need to make the most of opportunities to rest as they arise. It is important to recognise the

extra fatigue experienced through having to focus on non-visual cues to move safely through an unfamiliar environment, particularly where terrain is more uneven.

People who have lost sight may also experience occasional hallucinations, such as the sudden onset of silent visual hallucinations occurring with **Charles Bonnet Syndrome**. These can be disorientating, causing even the most familiar places to become strange; on these occasions, people who may otherwise be quite happy walking solely with a cane or a stick along a familiar route may need more guiding than usual.

In addition to varied support needs, **people have different priorities and interests while out walking**. For example, some people may be there to chat and socialise. Guide dog owners might like to use the opportunity to give their dog a free run. Other walkers may prefer some peace to soak up the different environments and atmospheres for themselves. Some might be keen to know more about what is around them, such as:

- Landmarks for navigation, particularly on regular routes and for people who have completed long cane training (e.g. those keen to shift from being physically guided to learning and negotiating some of the routes independently). Whilst it is important to include a variety of walks through the year, it can be helpful to integrate at least one routine route that people can familiarise themselves with over time.
- Stories or historical points of interest encountered during a walk.
- Information about the types of plants growing, perhaps being able to touch plants with distinctive stems, leaves or branching arrangements that will provide a tactile point of reference.
- Information about the local wildlife, again perhaps linking sounds, such as bird calls and songs, to specific wildlife to give an audio point of reference, and sharing stories about the quirks or 'characters' of different species.

This type of information gives people alternative ways of tuning into and interpreting different walk settings, adding extra interest and motivating continued group participation. *Sharing interest* rather than *telling* is important. If you have been chatting with a sight-impaired walker, do verbally sign off before leaving or walking on.

Equipment that can help sight-impaired walkers includes: telescopic walking poles to enhance stability and give depth perception clues; visors or caps to deflect bright light and give extra warning of upcoming branches; eye shields and sunglasses with photochromic lenses (wearing glasses with foam padding may also help to reduce soreness amongst people with dry eyes or corneal conditions in windy conditions); wellies/walking boots to minimise the discomfort of walking through deep puddles or mud; and wearing gloves

when the likelihood of encountering nettles, brambles and gorse is high. Some people might like to take a smartphone out with them, be it to use GPS technology to retain a general sense of the route, or for people with partial sight, using the camera zoom to magnify different features of interest. Experienced walkers may use these tools confidently, but new walkers might need time to experiment and trial.

How can I set up a specialist walk for people with sight impairments?

As with individuals in any walking group, people with sight impairments will have varying levels of fitness, confidence and skill. Some will prefer to walk with mainstream walking groups. Others, particularly less confident walkers, may appreciate the additional levels of social support provided by a specialist walk for people with visual impairments. More experienced walkers with sight impairment may wish to contribute to route planning over time.

There are a variety of visually impaired walking groups around the country who organise their walks in different ways to cater for mixed abilities. In urban areas with a larger volunteer base and reliable public transport to varied walk locations, walk leaders may organise a programme of walks each month (taking it in turns to recce different routes beforehand). It is important to be clear about the distances, terrains, gradients and potential challenges en route so that walkers can make informed decisions about whether or not to attend.

In rural areas, walks may be less frequent due to a smaller volunteer base and reliance on volunteer drivers in lieu of public transport to the walk sites. Mixed abilities can, however, still be catered for by identifying out-and-back routes, or routes following a figure of eight. Grading the different sections of the walk in terms of difficulty can be helpful, ideally prioritising smoother terrain for the first half, such that walkers can gradually increase their walking distances as they gain confidence and stamina over time.

If you are thinking about setting up a specialist walk for people with sight impairments, you can contact your local sight loss charity to see if they can promote the walk, link walkers up with local sighted guides, or offer tips based on their experiences of supporting people in the local area.

Further Information

- Dr Sarah Bell is a My Guide Volunteer and Lead Researcher of ‘Sensing Nature’; a two-year project exploring how people with sight impairment experience a sense of wellbeing (or otherwise) with nature over time. The project website offers more information, as well as tips and resources about getting into nature with sight impairment: www.sensing-nature.com.
- Dr Karis Jade Petty is a volunteer Walk Leader and sighted guide for walkers who have impaired vision, and an anthropologist researching the perception of the environment amongst people with impaired vision. Links to her projects and publications are available online: www.karisjadepetty.com.
- British Blind Sport aims to make a “visible difference” to the lives of people with visual impairments through sport and physical activity. Their services include providing inclusion guidance to organisations as well as advocating for people with visual impairment who are turned away from mainstream activities (including walking groups): www.britishblindsport.org.uk.
- Guide Dogs UK runs visual awareness and sighted guiding training as part of their “My Guide” scheme: www.guidedogs.org.uk/services-we-provide/my-guide. Do contact myguide@guidedogs.org.uk or call 0345 143 0229 for more information.
- The Royal National Institute for the Blind website has a wealth of information about the range of conditions that can cause sight impairment: www.rnib.org.uk/eye-health/eye-conditions.
- Visionary is a membership organisation for local sight loss charities, and may provide an avenue for identifying your local sight loss organisation: www.visionary.org.uk.

Using this guide: If you have found this guide useful and/or would like to feedback on the content, we would love to hear from you. Do get in touch via:

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