

Caring for older adults with blindness or low vision

About two thirds of people who are blind or have low vision are over the age of 65. That means you will most likely encounter many clients who need assistance due to their vision condition.

This factsheet will give you some guidance on how to better care for older people who are blind or have low vision.

How to guide someone with low vision

The sighted guide technique:

1. Offer your arm

Touch the back of your hand to the back of theirs. They will then hold your arm just above the elbow.

2. Stay half a step ahead

When you start walking, make sure the person is half a step behind you and slightly to the side. Walk at a pace that is comfortable for both of you.

3. Narrow spaces

Move your guiding arm towards the centre of your back to indicate that they need to walk behind you. The person should step in behind you while still holding your arm. When you have passed through the narrow space bring your arm back to its usual position by your side.

4. Guiding to a chair

Walk up and place your guiding arm on the chair. The person you are guiding can then move their hand down your arm to locate the chair to seat themselves.



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Communication tips

Do	Don't
Identify yourself. Don't assume someone will recognise you by your voice.	Never channel conversation through a third person.
Speak naturally and clearly. Loss of eyesight does not mean loss of hearing.	Don't avoid words like "see" or "look" or talking about everyday activities such as watching TV or videos. Use everyday language.
Keep using body language. This will affect the tone of your voice and give a lot of extra information to the person with vision loss.	Avoid situations where there is competing noise.
In a group situation, do a roll call and introduce the other people present.	Don't assume someone needs help. Always ask first.

Safety

Identifying trip hazards is especially important for older people who are blind or have low vision.

- A railing along common hallways can help people walk unassisted and orientate themselves.
- Chairs should be pushed in and any rubbish on the floor should be picked up immediately.
- Where possible, it's good to inform people of any changes to their environment eg handymen in the facility, items in the walkway, etc.



Orientating

You can orientate someone to their room by starting from a central point, such as their bed.

When orienting someone to a new area, walk with them rather than giving only verbal directions. This helps them learn distances and pick up sensory cues, so next time they can make the trip independently.

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Mealtimes

Ask if someone needs assistance with their meal, rather than offering to cut the food. You can help orientate them to what is on the plate by saying:

"The steak is at 3 o'clock, the salad is at 6 o'clock and the potatoes are at 9 o'clock."

Colour contrast can be important for people with vision conditions. Placing a dark tray or cloth under a light plate can define the plate edges making it easier to locate food.

For people who might struggle with wayward peas flying off a plate, an easy solution can be found with a plate guard. It's a plastic device with a rounded edge that attaches to the side of a plate and stops food spillage.

Provide any hot drinks in non-spill containers and tell the person where they are placed.



Personal items

Don't move furniture or personal items around. Keep regularly used items like TV remotes in the same place. If you have to move someone's belongings, let them know.

Toiletries: Keep toothbrush and toothpaste in a cup in the bathroom, differentiate the shampoo and conditioner with a hair tie on the bottles.

Clothes: Keep closet in order. Organise clothes from light to dark or add tactile stitches to identify back of the jumper.



Other tips

Knowing the time and date can help provide structure to a daily routine. Ensure individuals have access to a radio, talking clock, talking watch, braille watch or clock with large numbers. Large print calendars and diaries are also available.

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Services available to older adults with blindness and low vision



Telelink

Weekly social groups available over the phone. Everything from gardening and cooking groups to trivia and book clubs. There are also in language conversation groups in Greek, Arabic, Italian, Cantonese, Spanish, Vietnamese, Polish and Mandarin.

Telelink is a complimentary service available to all Vision Australia clients aged 18 and over.

Vision Australia Library

As a member of the Vision Australia Library you can access thousands of fiction and non-fiction reading materials including:

- books, magazines and newspapers (in audio, braille and ebraille)
- braille music
- podcasts.

That includes all the best sellers, classics and new releases, and all the national daily papers, and regional and local newspapers, are available as library subscriptions.

