Better Sight
A Help the Aged advice leaflet

In association with

RNIB
challenging blindness
As we grow older, our sight tends to change naturally, so that almost everyone over the age of 65 needs to wear glasses. Unfortunately, some people's sight will deteriorate further so that they have difficulties seeing even with glasses.

Regular eye tests and suitable glasses will increase the chances of your sight remaining good. Deterioration of sight need not prevent you from leading a full and independent life.

Details of helpful organisations given in the text are given at the end of this leaflet.

**Eye tests**

An eye test is not just a 'glasses' test: it is a vital check on the health of your eyes. Eye diseases can often be detected at an early stage, usually before you have even noticed anything is wrong. This is very important as early treatment may halt the progress of the eye disease and prevent further damage to your vision.

Glasses, contact lenses and low vision aids (special magnifiers) can keep your sight up to the best possible standard and sight problems can often be overcome.

It is therefore recommended that you have an eye test at least every two years, and more often if you notice any change in your vision.
Where to have an eye test

Eye tests can be carried out by:
- Optometrists - often called opticians or ophthalmic opticians
- Ophthalmic medical practitioners - doctors specialising in eye care

Most high streets have at least one optical practice. If you have difficulty finding an optical practice, contact your local Health Authority which keeps a list of those in your area. You can find the telephone number and address of your Health Authority in the telephone directory. If you are housebound, a home visit may be possible; you shouldn't have to pay for this if you are entitled to free eye tests.

For more information on what to expect from a thorough eye test, RNIB produce a useful leaflet called 'Open your eyes and get a good eye test.'

Paying for eye tests

From 1st April 1999 free NHS eye tests were reintroduced for people aged 60 and over. If you are aged 60 or over you can go into any optical practice and ask for a free NHS eye test. You do not need any special proof or voucher, but you will be asked to sign a form to declare that you are over 60.

If you are under 60 you will usually have to pay for your eye test, but there are some exceptions. For more details, contact the RNIB helpline and ask for the Welfare Rights Department.
Regular check-ups with your doctor

If your eye test reveals any condition that needs treatment or further investigation, you will probably be referred to your doctor. If necessary, your doctor can then arrange for you to see a hospital eye specialist (ophthalmologist).

It is important to see your doctor regularly for a general health check as other conditions and medicines can affect your sight.

Where to buy glasses

If your eye test indicates that you need glasses, the optometrist is legally obliged to give you a prescription. This will detail the type and strength of lenses you need. You can take this prescription and use it to buy glasses from any supplier. You do not have to buy your glasses in the practice where you have your eye test. Some glasses are expensive so it can be important to shop around.

Wherever you buy your glasses, the staff should make sure that your glasses fit and have the correct lenses to reduce your sight problems.
Different types of glasses and contact lenses

An optometrist can help you make the most of your sight by advising you on the most suitable lenses for your needs. There is a wide choice of different lenses - bifocals, trifocals, and varifocals - which can help you see in different situations. Lenses may be tinted to cut down on glare. Optometrists can also advise on lighter lenses and frames as well as the different types of contact lenses available.

Whatever glasses you choose, it is important to remember to keep them clean. When you are not using them, keep them in a protective case or cover to avoid scratches. Scratched lenses increase the problem of glare and can reduce clear vision. Never place glasses with the front of the lenses face down on a surface.

If you still have problems seeing with your glasses or contact lenses, you may find magnifiers and other low vision devices helpful. See page 7 for more information.

Ready-made glasses

You can buy ready-made reading glasses from a number of outlets including supermarkets. However, these should only be used as a temporary, short-term solution. It is rare for both your eyes to need exactly the same amount of magnification and whilst it’s unlikely that they will harm your sight, using ready-made glasses can result in eye strain and headaches. **It is therefore recommended that you have an eye test to check the health of your eyes and to find out which glasses are right for you.**
Help with the cost of glasses

Some people are entitled to a voucher to help pay for glasses. Vouchers can be issued whenever new glasses are needed because of a change in your prescription. The value of the voucher depends on the kind of glasses you need and it should be enough to cover the full price. Sometimes, however, the voucher is not enough and you may have to make up the full cost yourself. Vouchers can be used in any optical practice, so once again it may be worth shopping around.

You are entitled to a voucher for glasses if you:

- receive Income Support, Family Credit or income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance
- have been prescribed complex lenses
- are a hospital eye patient and need frequent changes of glasses
- have a low income or certificate HC2 from the NHS Health Benefits Division.

Do remember to tell your optometrist if you are entitled to a voucher. For further information about the voucher scheme, ask your optometrist for leaflet HC11 “Are you entitled to help with health costs?”. Alternatively you can ring SeniorLine on 0808 800 6565, or the RNIB helpline and ask for the Welfare Rights Department.

If you are a war pensioner and do not qualify for a voucher, you may be able to claim a refund on the cost of your glasses. For more details contact the War Pensions helpline on 01253-858858.
Low vision equipment and services

Optical aids

There are many different optical aids which can help you see better. The most simple optical aids are special **magnifiers**. These can make things look bigger so that you can perform tasks you find difficult because your eyesight has deteriorated. Magnifiers may be held in your hand, have their own stand or they may be built into your glasses.

Reading frames or “typoscopes” are useful to reduce glare and concentrate vision on the area of print being read. You can make your own very easily by cutting out an oblong from a piece of black card.

It is important that you get optical aids which are suitable for your particular eye condition and for a given activity. It is likely you will want to do different things such as reading the newspaper, watching television, or reading a bus number, so you may find that you need several different types. For advice on optical aids, you should ask your doctor or eye specialist (ophthalmologist) to refer you to a low vision clinic.