

Low Vision and Blindness

Definition

Low vision and blindness are disabilities affecting people's sight. People affected by these disabilities may have some usable vision, or none at all. Some people who are blind may use a cane, while others use a guide dog. Many patients acquire vision-related disabilities as they age.

Background Information

Many different conditions can result in vision impairments. Infections, older age, head trauma, stroke, and diabetes can all result in low vision. Patients may have a loss of their peripheral or central vision. They may lose sight completely in one or both eyes. Some individuals are able to see general outlines of objects, but not details. Some can read text with a magnifying glass, or if it's written in large print. Others require words to be written in Braille. All these patients are at higher risk for injury in an unfamiliar environment.

Accommodating Patients with Low Vision and Blindness

- ▶ If the person has a guide dog, **do not touch or speak to the dog** without their permission.
- ▶ **Identify yourself when you enter a room**, similar to the way you would on a phone call: "Hi Melanie, it's Dr. Peterson." Also tell the person when you are leaving the room instead of just walking away.
- ▶ **Ask if the person needs assistance.** Some patients will appreciate holding your arm as they walk; others will prefer to walk on their own. Do not simply grab their arm without warning.
- ▶ **Do not move their assistive device before asking.** It is not only impolite to touch their property without permission, but could be dangerous if they cannot find their device.
- ▶ **Provide a safe environment.** This means clearing the hallways and rooms of any clutter, ensuring good lighting, and offering medical instructions in large print.

Communicating with Patients with Low Vision and Blindness

- ▶ **Don't talk louder** to these patients than to others.
- ▶ **Don't worry about using phrases like "Let's see..."** or "I'm going to take a look." These are colloquial and are not taken as insulting.
- ▶ If the patient is about to move into an unfamiliar space, **orient them with your words:** "There's an exam table about four feet in front of you. There's a small computer stand just to your left."
- ▶ **Don't assume everyone can read Braille.** Many patients with vision impairments "read" in other ways using new technology. There are computer programs that read emails aloud. Smart phones can scan a document, such as a receipt, and "speak" the amount due. Find out how your patient prefers to get information.

Clinical Scenario

Nancy has been legally blind (meaning her vision is 20/200 or poorer) for the past 15 years. She has a guide dog to help her get around. During her appointment today, a new medical assistant exclaims, "What a cute dog!" and starts to pet him. You ask the assistant to hang on a minute, and then ask Nancy if it's okay to pet her dog. She says it's not a good idea, because the dog is on the harness and is "working." It can be distracting to a working guide dog to be petted or talked to.

When it's time for Nancy to have her blood drawn, you explain how to get to the lab: "We are going out the door and to the left. It's down the hallway on your right. Would you like me to help you find it?" She says, "No, thank you, I know where it is." You ask the medical assistant to walk ahead and move chairs and other items out of Nancy's way.

Resources

AgingCare

www.agingcare.com/Health-Conditions

The Mayo Clinic

<http://mayocl.in/W85W5K>

The National Eye Institute

www.nei.nih.gov

Job Accommodation Network

<http://www.askjan.org/media/atoz.htm>

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Inclusive Health Care was developed by the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston and Boston Children's Hospital. We have decades of experience in workforce training and specialized consultation related to disability inclusion.

