

## Vision & Dementia

This factsheet gives an insight into the visual difficulties that people with dementia may experience and how we may be able to help them. Understanding potential perceptual problems and intervening with appropriate help, support and reassurance can greatly assist people with dementia to feel safe and secure.

Dementia is one of the most common and serious disorders of later life, affecting 5% of people over 65.

Sight loss among people with dementia can be caused by:

- An eye condition, such as cataracts
- Another health condition, such as stroke
- Normal ageing of the eye
- The dementia itself

Visual difficulties can result in a variety of 'visual mistakes' (including illusions, misperceptions, misidentifications and sometimes even hallucinations). They can cause a person with dementia to misinterpret their environment and what is in it.

### Accurate perception

'Vision' refers to seeing with the eyes, and 'perceiving' refers to making sense of the information received by the eyes (and the other senses).

To perceive accurately requires the ability to co-ordinate all the components of the visual system (eyes, optic muscles, retinas, optic nerve) and process information from other senses and thoughts. It also depends on overall health of the body, visual system and brain, alertness, mood, motivation and even the expectation of what 'should' be seen.

There are many components to vision: adjusting and maintaining optimal focus; adjusting to different light levels; perceiving depth of field, appreciating colour; separating objects from background; making the accurate small eye movements required to follow moving objects and scan information.

Vision loss among the elderly is a major healthcare problem. Approximately one person in three has a vision reducing eye disease by the age of 65. Dementia patients are subject to the same conditions as other elderly patients. As well as the general problems of ageing, dementia patients can also suffer from visual disturbances caused by the brain rather than the visual system. That is, their problem can be having difficulty perceiving what they see rather than how sharply they see it.

Problems most commonly occur in four areas:

Motion	Depth
Colour	Contrast

Visual hallucinations have been reported to increase with loss of visual acuity in some dementia patients. Like other dementia symptoms, not everyone with the disease will experience visual and perceptual problems to the same degree

## Regular eye tests

Most people have regular eye tests and adjust automatically to their changing vision as they get older. They can use glasses, accurately problem-solve, or learn to compensate for visual changes. However, people with dementia, increasingly, may not be able to do this.

Eye tests are especially important for people with dementia because the symptoms of dementia may mask the symptoms of sight loss. If you have dementia, additional sight loss may also increase your risk of falls or sense of disorientation.

We advise that you should have an eye test at least once a year unless otherwise recommended by your optometrist. An eye examination allows the opportunity for your vision and the health of your eyes to be checked.

## Preparing for an eye test

It can help if a relative, carer or other person who knows the person being examined is present. This person should know the person's history and understand their visual requirements.

Everyone is unique and the eye examination will be tailored to the specific need. It is important to ensure an individual with dementia feels at ease during the eye test. Instructions will be easy to follow and procedures explained clearly, allowing the individual with dementia a greater chance of understanding the eye test.

An eye test at home can provide a familiar environment for a person with dementia, allowing them to feel more relaxed and therefore alert for the examination.

## A change of glasses?

The more people can see, the easier it is for them to make sense of their world. Many people with dementia give the impression of having poor sight when, in fact, they need spectacles. Carers may assume that the patient will automatically reject spectacles, but there are ways of helping people get used to them in dementia.

Glasses should be easily identifiable as being for distance or near. Switching to multifocal lenses without prior experience may lead to greater disorientation and should be changed with caution.

## Other ways to help...

- Make things bigger (such as using clocks and watches with large numbers)
- Make things brighter (by using good lighting)
- Make things bolder (use contrasting backgrounds)

## Adapting your environment

- Make sure you have good, even, internal and external lighting
- Use contrasting colours for floors, walls and furniture
- Make sure tablecloths and mats contrast with crockery
- Mark the beginning and ends of stairs and steps, using different texture or colours



### Update your gadgets

Specialist gadgets are available to support your everyday activities, such as clear faced clocks and watches, easy to use remote controls for TVs, big button phones, talking labels to stick to things.

### Advice for friends, family & carers

If you would like to find out more about dementia and the importance of vision, or to discuss any questions, call and speak with our Optometrist. Our vision report, following an eye test can help us all to help people with dementia. To book an appointment for an eye test call us today on 020 8428 4068.