

Common Signs of Vision Loss

The behaviors listed may indicate an established or emerging vision problem. Note what you have observed, ask others to do likewise, and share with the individual's eye care provider. Schedule an eye examination for the individual with an ophthalmologist or optometrist who has experience working with people who have intellectual or developmental disabilities.

When Walking – Spatial Orientation Challenges

- Walking squarely into objects (e.g. furniture), the environment (e.g. doorframes, walls), and/or people
- Walking into cautionary signage (e.g. "wet floor", "sidewalk closed")
- Walking into protruding waist-level obstacles (e.g. water bubblers)
- Knocking over items unintentionally during travel
- Brushing gently up against objects, the environment, and/or people
- Misjudging the space needed for safe passage between objects or people
- Veering toward objects, people, and/or other hazards without timely corrective or aversive movement
- Reaching for furniture or walls to establish spatial orientation

When Walking – Hesitancy

- Moving hesitantly when approaching and/or moving across large-patterned carpets, across shiny surfaces (e.g. highly polished floors, wet walkways), and shadowy areas
- Walking hesitantly when there are no apparent safety concerns (e.g. in open space without obstacles on flat/smooth terrain)
- Walking with unusual slowness, hesitation, and/or caution, especially when approaching/moving past familiar objects (e.g. furniture) or the environment (e.g. doorframes)
- Stopping at the edge of shadows or walking around shadowed/darkened areas
- Hesitancy solving seemingly simple spatial problems
- Constantly looking down

Common Signs of Vision Loss (continued)

When Walking – Tripping or Falling

- Increased tripping or falling
- Tripping over hoses on the floor (e.g. clear oxygen hose) or ground (e.g. garden hose)
- Tripping over something near one's feet before starting to walk
- Tripping over pets near one's feet or in resting in one's travel path

When Walking – Visual Perception Challenges

- Mistaking an object in the distance for something else while walking (e.g. a mailbox for a person)
- Inability to locate pets (indoors or outdoors)
- Walking past family, friends, or familiar people without acknowledging them
- Inability to visually track moving objects (e.g. balls, cars) and people
- Suddenly surprised by people walking across the front of the body
- Walking through an open doorway with people involved in a meeting
- Walking into the wrong restroom

When Walking – Elevation Changes

- Difficulty locating available handrails on stairs or steps
- Foot searching when approaching steps or other elevation changes
- Avoiding stairs/steps altogether
- Under or over-stepping when negotiating stairs, steps, curbs, ramps, or uneven pavement
- Missing or falling off the first/last step on stairs or set of steps
- Falling off or being surprised by curbs, especially down curbs
- Stopping at/being surprised by the slightest of elevation changes

When Walking – Lighting Considerations

- Stopping/pausing when transitioning from dark to bright or bright to dark lighting
- Avoiding travel in dark areas or at night
- Becoming disoriented in familiar places, especially at night
- Decreased walking speed or requesting sighted assistance during dark indoor or night travel
- Hesitancy when moving into or through dimly lit rooms or outdoors after sunset

Common Signs of Vision Loss (continued)

When Walking – Outdoor Specific

- Walking past needed poles (e.g. bus stop, pedestrian push buttons)
- Not recognizing dangerous environmental situations (e.g. construction areas or similar situations) which require an alternate route to maintain appropriate safety
- Not recognizing the colors on traffic lights, various road signs, vehicles
- Walking into yellow “Caution” tape within construction areas
- Walking too close to poles with wide bases
- Walking into construction barriers
- Veering into scaffolding
- Walking into bank ropes
- Walking on and off the grass along a walkway or sidewalk
- Inability to accurately follow prominent crosswalk lines
- Not stopping at driveway or street crossings or visually checking for approaching vehicles
- Walking into head-level obstacles (e.g. tree branches, protruding signage, signs along sidewalk, protruding ladders on construction vehicles)
- Not lifting feet high enough in anticipation of tree roots interrupting an otherwise smooth sidewalk
- Not slowing down in anticipation of up/down stairs, curbs, or ramps
- Stepping into deep puddles
- Stepping into deep holes in the pavement
- Having difficulty finding smooth and available pavement
- Veering into clearly established snowbanks
- Difficulty transitioning in and out of vehicles (e.g. cars, vans, buses)
- Difficulty finding available support railings in vehicles

When Reaching

- Difficulty locating dropped objects, doorknobs, light switches etc.
- Groping for objects or touching them in an uncertain manner
- Knocking things over when reaching (e.g. cups with water or other liquids)
- Reaching inaccurately (e.g. beyond, in front of, or off to the side of a desired object)

Common Signs of Vision Loss (continued)

When Performing Activities of Daily Living

- Difficulty aligning two objects (e.g. putting toothpaste on a toothbrush, finding a keyhole with a key)
- Difficulty finding the proper key among others on a keychain
- Inserting a key into keyhole with the key's teeth facing the wrong direction
- Sitting further away from an activity or backing up to see (e.g. watching TV)
- Picking up/taking someone else's belongings
- Difficulty finding or identifying personal belongings
- Holding items further away when looking
- Missing low-contrast items (i.e. dark-colored items vs. a dark-colored background or light-colored items vs. a lightly colored background)
- Not looking at the task and relying more on touch for successful completion
- Difficulty with or avoidance of usual or favorite tasks
- Difficulty dressing or determining the proper sidedness of familiar clothes
- Mismatching clothing colors when dressing
- Misjudging similar colors (e.g. navy vs. black or purple, red vs. orange)
- Tilting head to see something more clearly
- Difficulty discerning between coins
- Difficulty distinguishing paper money
- Asking someone to take the bills/coins necessary for a purchase
- Not knowing what bills/coins were received for change from a purchase

When Reading

- Difficulty reading signage or household items with print (e.g. appliance dials or flat-screen buttons, thermostat, elevator button panel, TV remote, phone buttons, cellphone display)
- Difficulty reading printed materials in fine, regular, or large print (e.g. preferred magazines/books, mail, medicine bottles)
- Difficulty reading cursive writing (e.g. written correspondence, one's signature, grocery list)
- Difficulty reading indoor/outdoor signage
- Moving items closer to the eyes or moving closer to the activity (e.g. reading print or looking at pictures in a book or magazine)
- Attempting to read/look at print or pictures upside down without correction

Common Signs of Vision Loss (continued)

When Eating/Drinking

- Difficulty locating food items on the plate with utensils (e.g. unsuccessful fork picking for food)
- Bringing empty utensil (e.g. fork or spoon) to the mouth
- Using the wrong utensil to find/eat a certain food
- Food dropping off the utensil when bringing to the mouth
- Difficulty knowing how foods are arranged on the plate
- Difficulty finding things on one place mat or place setting (e.g. utensils, plate, cups, napkin etc.)
- Difficulty pouring liquids (i.e. aligning the liquid with the cup or container)
- Thinking a cup is empty when it has water in it
- Overfilling cups/spilling
- Under/over-reaching for cups and utensils
- Missing or leaving food on the plate
- Finishing a meal prematurely out of frustration
- Neglecting food on one side of the plate consistently
- Changes in eating behavior

When Talking

- Difficulty recognizing familiar faces
- Unable to make direct eye contact
- Not reading facial expressions/cues
- Not facing the sighted person during a conversation
- Extending a handshake from an odd angle
- Failure to acknowledge an outstretched handshake by another person

Lighting Needs and/or Changes

- Turning lights off, even when in dim lighting situations
- Wearing sunglasses and/or a brimmed hat indoors
- Requesting additional or different kinds of lighting
- Slower “adaptation” time (i.e. entering indoor darkness from bright sunny outdoors or vice versa causes the traveler to be immobilized)
- Increased sensitivity to bright lights (e.g. headlights) or reflected light (i.e. snow-blindness)
- Expressing there’s isn’t enough light when the lighting is suitable for others
- Squinting in brightly-lit environments or outdoors in the sun
- Shielding the eyes or looking away from bright light sources
- Making a visor or brim with one’s hand
- Preferred seating with windows behind the body

Common Signs of Vision Loss (continued)

Behavior Changes

- Acting confused or disoriented
- Difficulty recognizing familiar faces
- Loss of interest in favorite activity such as looking at magazines
- Showing a shorter attention span than usual
- Seemingly impaired memory or more difficulty with concentration
- Complaining of pain in or around the eyes
- Expressing of frequent headaches
- Turning the head from side to side more frequently
- Increased frustration trying to complete familiar tasks which require fine motor coordination or looking at visual detail
- Seemingly being able to see better at some times than others
- Excessive rubbing of the eyes
- Refusal to go outside at night or enter dark rooms
- Excessive blinking/frowning

Changes in Appearance

- Excessive tearing or discharge from the eye
- Redness of the eye or area around the eye
- Eyes misaligned or turning in different directions from each other
- Unusual head movements
- Watery eyes
- Closing eyes
- Suddenly wearing mismatched or dirty clothes



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See also MCB/DDS Partnership handouts:

- Sensitivity to Vision Loss: How to Best Assist a Person Who Has Vision Impairment
- Creating a Safe Environment
- Human Guide

For additional resources, please visit: focusonvisionandvisionloss.org