

Working with Individuals with Visual Impairments

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines **visual impairment** as distance visual acuity of 20/50 or worse.¹ Prevalence of visual impairments in U.S. adults age 60-69 is only 1.49%, but this number steadily increases with age, leaping to 25.66% in adults 80+.² Rates of **vision loss** – which is broadly defined as trouble seeing even with correction – are higher.

Regardless of whether your patient has a clinically diagnosed visual impairment or just can't see as well as they used to, knowing how to adapt your message to suit their needs is important. Below are some things to consider:

Mild to Moderate Vision Loss

- For those with mild to moderate vision loss, make sure any printed materials you give them use fonts 14pts or higher, increasing size as necessary. Simple fonts like **Times New Roman**, **Arial**, and Calibri are best. Black words on a non-glossy white background is the easiest to read. Avoid using all caps; instead emphasize using **bolding**.³
- Invest in a page magnifier for patients who need extra help seeing small print. Most are very affordable and can be found at office supply stores.

Severe Vision Loss & Blindness

- **Speak clearly and at a normal volume:** trouble seeing does not mean a person can't hear.
- **Limit outside noise:** Even if a person's hearing is not compromised background noise can be distracting, especially for someone who can't rely on visual cues to know what is happening.
- It's good etiquette to **use your name** when greeting a person. You can't assume someone will recognize your voice, especially if they meet you infrequently.
- Always **introduce others** who enter a conversation and let your patient know when they leave.
- Keep your work space **clear of clutter** that could present a tedious obstacle for someone relying on a cane to guide them.
- If a person has a **guide dog** don't feed or touch her without permission. You can ask if there's anything the dog might need (such as water), but beyond that it is unnecessary to interact with the dog.

For all patients

- **Ask your patient** if they need your help before doing things for them. Many individuals with visual impairments have adapted to their condition, especially if it isn't new.
- Remember: visual acuity is not a measure of a person's maturity or IQ. Exaggerating your speech, rushing to do simple tasks for them, and generally fussing over them is insulting and likely unnecessary. **Treat your patients with dignity and respect!**

¹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Visual Health Initiative. National Data. CDC Website. <https://www.cdc.gov/visionhealth/data/national.htm>. Updated September 30, 2015. Accessed July 3, 2017.

² National Institutes of Health National Eye Institute. Vision Impairment Tables. NIH Website.. https://nei.nih.gov/eyedata/vision_impaired/tables. Accessed July 3, 2017

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective: Part 5, Chapter 3. Accessed July 3, 2017 <https://www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Outreach/WrittenMaterialsToolkit/Downloads/ToolkitPart09.pdf>