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## **Fact Sheet 1**

## **Beyond Blindness and Introduction to Vision Loss**

Beyond Blindness is an independent South Australian Agency supporting a Membership of people who have vision loss or blindness. We provide services to assist with socialising, connecting with the community, accessing goods and services as well as targeted financial assistance.

You may be reading this because you have met or know someone who is vision impaired or blind and would like to know how you can help. Whether you are helping with transport, shopping or sharing a cup of coffee, this information is designed to give you some general information and has been gathered and reviewed by our Beyond Blindness Members and Staff.

We hope you find the following useful whether you are a partner, friend, volunteer, health or service worker. Please contact us during office hours if you would like any further information.

## **Vision Loss and Blindness – The Basics**

Different levels of vision loss mean everyone has their own unique experiences and there is no one-size-fits-all kind of help for the people you may meet.

Many people learn new ways of doing things and are able to maintain their independence after a period of adjustment. Some people do not want or need assistance, so it is always best to ask first. Not everyone with vision loss or blindness considers themselves as having a disability.

Some people have vision loss or blindness from birth whereas the onset of vision loss for many may occur later in life. Vision loss can also be caused by accidents and stroke or other types of brain injury.

In Australia, the majority of people with vision loss have some remaining vision. Only a very small number of people have no useful vision and consider themselves totally blind.

People who have an eye condition may also wear glasses to maximise their remaining vision however their vision is not corrected to what is considered normal levels.

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You might also hear the term ‘Legal Blindness’. People who meet a certain threshold or level of vision loss may be deemed ‘Legally Blind’ by their eye specialist. Legal blindness is a scale. While some people have some remaining vision, others may be totally blind. Legally blind status changes access to Centrelink payments.

 Accepted terminology in Australia includes:

Low vision, or

Vision impaired (we do not use visually impaired; however this is used in other countries), or

Legally blind, or

Blind (it is ok to use the word Blind)

## **Common Eye Conditions and their Impacts**

The most common eye diseases resulting in vision loss and blindness in Australia are: *macular degeneration, retinitis pigmentosa (RP), glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy and cataract*.

It is also possible to have more than one eye condition. Some eye conditions are preventable, some are treatable to delay further vision loss, and some are progressive whereby the vision worsens over time.

If a person has *macular degeneration* resulting in central vision loss, they may experience difficulties reading and recognising faces but may still be able to walk around safely, especially in familiar environments.

People with *retinitis pigmentosa (RP)* can experience tunnel vision. They may have increasing difficulties walking around, being less able to see people in their side vision and also in seeing steps and kerbs. Many also experience night-blindness. While having these difficulties, some are still able to read print. Others may need additional lighting and magnification to read. Unfortunately, RP is a progressive eye condition.

*Charles Bonnet Syndrome (CBS) s*ufferers experience visual hallucinations caused by the brain’s adjustment to significant vision loss. It occurs most often among the elderly who are more likely than any other age group to have eye conditions, such as age-related macular degeneration.

Other impacts of low vision/blindness include:

* inability to hold a driver’s licence
* increased difficulty in glare or when looking at reflective surfaces such as signage
* reduced ability to see on dull days
* fluctuating or deteriorating vision
* slower adaptation to changes in lighting such as when entering a building from the outdoors and walking in and out of shadows, under veranda’s and trees

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