

Visual impairment and learning disability

**What are the links between visual impairment and learning disability?
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This factsheet looks at the visual impairment that many people with a learning disability may have and how they can be supported.

What are the links between visual impairment and learning disability?

- According to the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities one in three people with learning disabilities is likely to have sight or hearing problems or both.
- Visual impairment is more likely in someone with severe – profound learning disabilities or Down’s syndrome, or older people.
- Visual impairment often goes unrecognised in people with learning disabilities despite the fact that it is possible to test people who cannot read or use words.

How might someone without verbal language communicate eye problems?

There are several ways in which eye problems can be detected in someone who does not use words.

The first set of indications an eye test may be needed is in appearance:

- Eyes that are closed/partially closed a lot.
- In-growing eyelashes
- Red eyes
- Milky looking eyes
- Frequent eye infections
- Very fast eye movements/eyes that move constantly
- Watery eyes.

The second is in a person’s behaviour:

- Light gazing
- Adopting unusual head positions
- Avoiding tasks that involve close work

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- Frequent touching of eyes
- Finger flapping in front of eyes
- Moves head but not eyes to look at things
- Frequent head shaking/unusual movements with head
- Putting hand over one eye
- Constant frowning
- Constant blinking
- Avoiding bright lights
- Drawing very small/large pictures
- Short attention span.

How can a person with learning disabilities be supported to have their eyes checked by an optician?

- The person who goes with the individual for an eye test should know them and their communication needs extremely well.
- The above should have a good understanding of the individual's eye problems and their health in general.
- It may be useful to visit the place where the test is going to be beforehand so everyone is prepared.
- It may be useful to meet the professional beforehand so a discussion can be had on how the test can be organised to cause the least possible anxiety.
- The individual may have to have drops, puffs of air or lights, in their eyes so their reaction to this needs to be considered.

How are eye problems dealt with?

The most common ways are:

- Glasses
- Surgery
- Eye drops
- Advice on adapting people's home environment.

How can I get further information?

Look Up: information on eye care and vision for people with learning disabilities
<http://www.lookupinfo.org/index.php?id=14>

Key Terms

Visual Impairment – problems with seeing.

Optician – professional who deals with eye problems

References

http://www.intellectualdisability.info/complex_disability/sight_probs.htm