Facts About Legal Blindness

What is Legal Blindness

In **Canada**, a person is **legally blind** if his or her best eye has less than 20/200 vision with the help of glasses or contact lenses. Having 20/200 vision **means** that a person cannot be more than 6.1 m (20 ft) away to see what a person with normal vision can see from 61 m (200 ft) away.

Legal blindness does not mean that a person cannot see at all. People who are legally blind often have some vision, but their field of vision may be very narrow or blurry. Or they may have blind spots that glasses cannot correct.

Being diagnosed as legally blind restricts a person's ability to obtain a driver's licence. But a legally blind person is usually eligible for low visibility aids and other benefits to help improve daily functioning.

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Measuring Vision:

The Snellen Eye Chart is a test that ophthalmologists and optometrists use to measure a person's **distance** visual acuity. It contains rows of letters, numbers, or symbols printed in standardized graded sizes.

Your eye doctor will ask you to read or identify each line or row at a fixed distance (usually 20 feet), although a 10-foot testing distance is also used.

If you can read line 8 (D E F P O T E C) from 20 feet away while wearing your regular glasses or contact lenses, the doctor records your vision (or visual acuity) as **20/20 with best correction**.

If the smallest print you can read is line 3 (T O Z) from 20 feet away while wearing your regular glasses or contact lenses, the doctor records your vision (or visual acuity) as **20/70 with best correction**.

Another definition of legal blindness is drawn from the measurement of an individuals *visual field*:

> visual field is the total area an individual can see without moving the eyes from side to side) of 20 degrees or less (also called tunnel vision) in the better-seeing eye.

Vision Impairment:

Much like low vision, there are many different definitions of visual impairment. "Visual impairment" is a general term that describes a wide range of visual function, from low vision through total blindness.

Here is an example of the variations in the term "visual impairment" or "visually impaired" from the World Health Organization Levels of Visual Impairment:

Moderate Visual Impairment:

- Snellen visual acuity = 20/70 to 20/160

Severe Visual Impairment:

- Snellen visual acuity = 20/200 to 20/400
- **OR** visual field of 20 degrees or less

Profound Visual Impairment:

- Snellen visual acuity = 20/500 to 20/1000
- **OR** visual field of 10 degrees or less

Like the term "legal blindness," "visual impairment" is not a *functional definition* that tells us very much about what a person can and cannot see. It is a classification system, rather than a definition.

Light Perception and light projection: These terms describe the ability to perceive the difference between light and dark, or daylight and nighttime. A person can have severely reduced vision and still be able to determine the difference between light and dark, or the general source and direction of a light.

- The stereotypical assumption – that people who are blind or have low vision live in a type of "blackness" that sighted people see when they close their eyes – is generally not accurate.
- Although every person sees differently, including persons with low vision, an individual who has light perception/projection can perceive the presence or absence of light. Some people describe light perception as knowing when a room light is on or off, or being able to walk toward a lighted lamp on a table in an otherwise darkened room.

Total blindness is the complete lack of light perception and form perception, and is recorded as "NLP," an abbreviation for "no light perception."

Few people today are totally without sight. In fact, 85% of all individuals with eye disorders have some remaining sight; approximately 15% are totally blind.

Some examples of different kinds of blindness are

- 10% = 20/200 vision is the upper border between defined blindness and poor vision. People in this category often are able to travel independently without aids, read and write.
- RP - Retinitis Pigmentosa (tunnel vision) often described as looking through a straw
- Macular degeneration (ring vision) where you do not have central vision, only around the outside of your eye.
- Cataracts (fuzzy blurry vision) usually this accompanies restrictions in light
- Glaucoma - The two main **types** are open-angle and angle-closure. These are marked by an increase of intraocular pressure (pressure inside the eye.) which, if unchecked, can result in a dramatic decrease in vision.
- Retinopathy of Prematurity - the decrease in or loss of vision caused by damage to the retna due to premature birth

Many of these eye conditions can eventually lead to complete blindness over a period of time.

blindness - the lack of any vision i.e. no light perception, colour or anything.

To understand this, try to imagine seeing through your elbow, what is that like?

Approximately half a million Canadians are estimated to be living with significant vision loss that impacts their quality of life, and every year more than 50,000 Canadians will lose their sight. This figure includes people who have no sight from birth, people who are legally blind, as well as people with less significant vision loss.

According to Statistics Canada, in Ontario there are 186,954 persons who are Blind or Vision Impaired.

There are more than 5.5 million Canadians with a major eye disease that could cause vision loss.

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is the leading cause of vision loss in Canada. There are about 1.4 million Canadians living with AMD, many of whom have vision loss or are at risk.

Other major causes of vision loss include diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, cataracts and refractive error.

The prevalence of vision loss in Canada is expected to increase nearly 30% in the next decade due to a demographic shift caused by our aging population i.e. the population of Canadians 65 and older is expected to double in the next 25 years. In addition, there is a growing incidence of key underlying causes of vision loss, such as obesity and diabetes.

Effects of vision loss:

- Only one-third of Canadian working-age adults with vision loss are employed.
- Older people with vision loss (60+) are three times more likely than those with good vision to experience clinical depression.
- Approximately half of Canadian working-age adults with vision loss are struggling to make ends meet on $20,000 a year or less.
- People with vision loss are at greater risk of social isolation and reduced community participation

For more information about vision loss, please send information inquiries to research@cnib.ca

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