



Central Office: 505 Silas Deane Highway, Wethersfield, CT 06109 Phone (860) 721-2822 Fax (860) 721-2823
Berlin: 240 Kensington Road, Berlin, CT 06037 Phone (860) 828-7017 Fax (860) 828-9248
Newington: 131 Cedar Street, Newington, CT 06111 Phone (860) 665-8586 Fax (860) 665-8533
Rocky Hill: 761 Old Main Street, Rocky Hill, CT 06067 Phone (860) 258-2770 Fax (860) 258-2767
www.ccthd.org

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Low Vision or Legal Blindness?

When considering the matter of eyesight, we often think in terms of having sight or being blind. But between the extremes of blindness and nearly “normal” vision, there is a third category of sightedness: low vision. In an effort to help people understand low vision and what can be done about it, February has been designated low vision month.

Low vision is defined as partial sight that cannot be corrected with glasses, contact lenses, medication, or surgery. While a person still has some sight, the vision loss is so great that it interferes with the ability to carry out normal activities of daily living. Low vision can be moderate to severe. At the moderate end, a person with low vision may have a visual acuity range from 20/70 to 20/200 after correction with glasses or contact lenses. When a person’s vision cannot be improved to better than 20/200 with contact lenses or glasses, he or she is considered to be legally blind.

According to Lighthouse International, there are 161 million people in the world who are visually impaired. Of those, 37 million are blind, and 124 million have low vision. In the United States, 16.5 million people age 45 or older report being visually impaired even with the use of contact lenses or glasses. Lighthouse International points out that by 2010, nearly 20 million Americans will suffer from a visual impairment.

Both injury and eye disease can result in low vision. Some causes include head injury, brain damage, cataracts, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, macular degeneration, and heredity. Symptoms of low vision include problems recognizing faces, difficulty reading (the print may appear distorted or broken), and trouble seeing and recognizing potential hazards such as steps, curbs, walls, and furniture.

Although many conditions may cause low vision, one of the leading causes is age-related macular degeneration. People who are particularly at risk for developing this condition are those age 50 and older, those with high blood pressure, people who smoke, and anyone with a family history of macular degeneration. This disease affects vision in the center of the eye, not the periphery. Vision loss can be slow or rapid, but it usually occurs over a period of a few years. As the population ages, it is expected the incidence of macular degeneration will rise as well. The National Eye Institute estimates there will be approximately 17 million Americans with moderate to severe cases of this condition by 2020. (At present, there are about half that number.) Anyone who experiences any of the following signs of macular degeneration should see an eye doctor immediately:

- Straight lines appear wavy.
- It is difficult to distinguish between colors.
- Details such as facial features or words in a book are hard to make out.
- It is hard to see at a distance.
- There are dark or empty spots in the center of your vision.

If you or someone you know suffers with low vision, there are things that can be done to make daily tasks

easier. Prevent Blindness America recommends getting vision rehabilitation to learn the skills necessary to live with your vision loss. There are special glasses and magnifying glasses that can be helpful, especially when reading or using the telephone. Large print books, magazines, and computers with large screens are welcome tools. And adding bright lights can maximize remaining sight. There are a number of resources and services available for people with low vision to make daily living a little easier.

To learn more about low vision, macular degeneration, and resources and rehabilitative services, contact Prevent Blindness at 1-800-331-2020 (www.preventblindness.org) or Lighthouse International's web site at www.lighthouse.org. For additional information about this or other public health concerns, visit the Central Connecticut Health District's web site at www.ccthd.org (860-721-2822).

