

VISION IMPAIRED WALKING GUIDELINES



AIM OF GUIDE

BLIND SPORTS & RECREATION VICTORIA (BSRV), ESTABLISHED IN 1977, IS A THRIVING NOT-FOR-PROFIT DEDICATED TO SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH LOW OR NO VISION OF ALL AGES AND BACKGROUNDS TO LEAD HEALTHY AND ACTIVE LIFESTYLES.

In Victoria there are over 100,000 people living with low vision or blindness, and as the population ages, this number continues to increase. There is a growing need for sport & recreation providers to build their capacity to develop programs that are welcoming and inclusive of this cohort.

This guide aims to help sport and recreation providers, including coaches, clubs, officials and physical education teachers, to overcome some of the challenges involved in effectively including people with vision loss in walking programs - whether it be a mainstream walking group or one specifically for people with vision loss. We hope it will help you better understand blindness and low vision, the benefits of walking for this group, strategies for effective inclusion, the role of sighted guides and important safety considerations.

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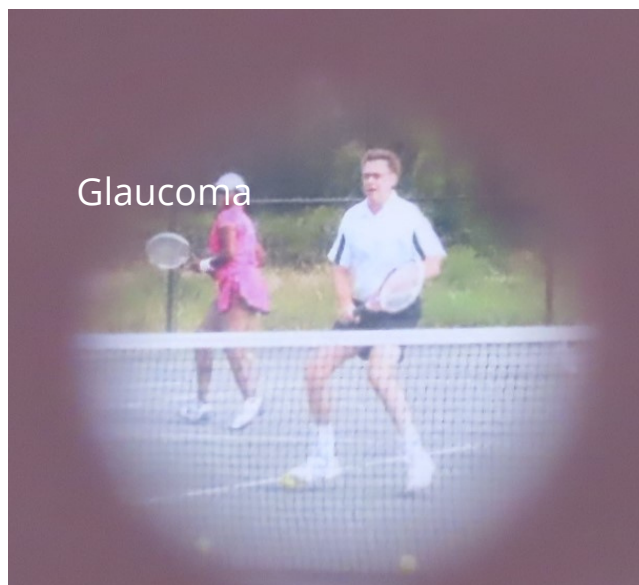
BLINDNESS & VISION LOSS

A WIDE RANGE OF EYE CONDITIONS MAY COMPROMISE PEOPLE'S VISION, BE IT AT BIRTH OR LATER IN LIFE. WHAT PEOPLE SEE IS UNIQUE TO THEM AND MAY CHANGE OVER TIME.

Some of the main conditions to be aware of include:

- **Glaucoma** is a slow progressive eye condition that is hereditary. Symptoms include loss of peripheral vision and glare sensitivity.
- **Cataracts** is a clouding of the normally clear lens of the eye and can be compared to looking through a frosted or steamed window. Symptoms include blurring of vision, poor night vision, fading of colour perception and glare sensitivity.
- **Diabetic Retinopathy** is a complication of Diabetes and can lead to total blindness. Symptoms include blotchy or blurred vision, glare sensitivity and difficulty seeing at night.
- **Macular Degeneration** causes damage to the macular at the back of the eye causing central vision loss. Symptoms leading to a blind spot in middle of the eye, inability to see fine detail, distorted vision and fading colours.
- **Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP)** is an inherited eye condition caused by a progressive degeneration of rod cells in the retina at the back of the eye. Symptoms include loss of peripheral vision, night blindness, seeing flashes of light and light & glare sensitivity.

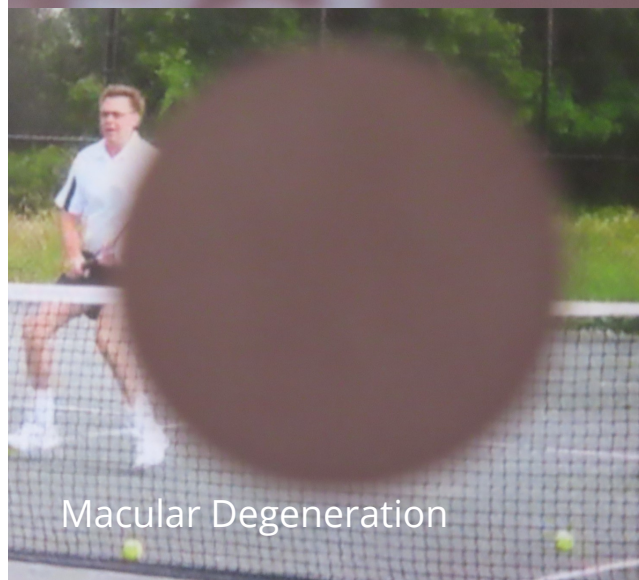
Some other less common causes of vision loss include tumors that affect the retina, nystagmus, infections during pregnancy like Rubella, Albanism and experiences of stroke or traumatic brain injury.



Glaucoma



Diabetic Retinopathy



Macular Degeneration

BENEFITS OF WALKING



GETTING ACTIVE WITH VISION LOSS

PEOPLE WHO LOSE THEIR VISION ARE AT INCREASED RISK OF EXPERIENCING SOCIAL ISOLATION, ANXIETY & DEPRESSION, AND LIVING SEDENTARY LIFESTYLES.

FACILITATING PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL WALKING GROUPS CAN PROMOTE VALUABLE OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE PHYSICAL FITNESS, MENTAL HEALTH AND OVERALL WELL-BEING.

Walking provides some important benefits:

- Better health, including increased cardiovascular & pulmonary fitness, reduced risk of heart disease & stroke, stronger bones, increased muscle strength, reduced body fat and improved management of conditions like Diabetes, Hypertension and muscular pain.
- Forging meaningful connections with other walkers, leading to friendship and reduced social isolation.
- Immersion in nature, particularly the smells, sounds and tactile elements.
- Gaining confidence and independence through a sense of achievement in doing exercise.
- Learning to negotiate new environments with challenges like noise levels, traffic and crowds.
- Learning more about the world, for example by participating in an audio-described historical walk.
- Enhanced public awareness of blindness, reducing negative attitudes and prejudice.

"WHAT IT [WALKING] ENABLES ME TO DO IS KEEP IN TOUCH WITH WHAT'S HAPPENING IN MY NEIGHBOURHOOD AND WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO ME. IT'S OPENED UP MY WORLD ENORMOUSLY", BSRV PARTICIPANT.

INCLUDING PEOPLE WITH VISION LOSS

Practical ways to support people who are blind or have low vision to join your walking group:

- Make it clear that they are welcome at the outset by approaching them and introducing them to others.
- Do a roll call so they know who is going on the walk with them.
- Ensure the person with vision loss has a sighted guide with them, whether it be a trained volunteer that you provide or an experienced support worker/partner/friend.
- Be aware of how you communicate or publicise walks; a person with vision loss may find technology and social media overwhelming. A phone call can really help people feel included.
- Promote your walking group through local organisations, including agencies that support people who are blind or vision impaired.
- Be clear in advance and in promotional materials about the distances, terrains, and potential challenges en route so that walkers can make informed decisions about whether to attend or not.
- If stopping at a cafe/restaurant during the walk, ensure guide dogs will be welcome there.
- The walk meeting point should be accessible and at the end, group members should be encouraged to help the individual with vision loss get back to public transport or offer a lift home.
- Have rest stops, as it can be extra tiring tackling new routes.
- Ensure there are toilet stops and participants are acquainted properly with the bathroom.
- Offer assistance with transportation if possible.



SIGHTED GUIDING

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

IT IS IMPORTANT TO HAVE THE RIGHT INSURANCE, AN EMERGENCY CONTACT PERSON FOR EACH PARTICIPANT, KNOWLEDGE OF ANY RELEVANT MEDICAL CONDITIONS, AND ALWAYS TAKE A FIRST AID KIT WITH YOU!

Some basic guiding principles include:

- Always use the person's name when directing questions to them.
- Ask how the person needs help, everyone's different!
- The person with vision loss holds the sighted guide's elbow, bicep or shoulder.
- The guide walks a foot in front at all times.
- Explain when approaching an obstacle at head or ground level.
- Give some audio description of where you are walking and what the guide can see.
- Describe how many steps are coming and whether they are up or down.
- Give as much information as possible about doorways ie. automatic, sliding, push or pull.
- To sit down, place the person's hand on back of the chair and tell them if the chair is at a table.
- Narrow spaces can get tricky - tell the person to walk behind you, while still holding your arm.
- Telescopic walking poles can enhance stability and depth perception.



"THE CONCENTRATION REQUIRED GOING FROM A TO B IS INCREDIBLY CHALLENGING, SO HAVING SOMEONE GO WITH YOU IS SO MUCH MORE HELPFUL," MAURICE GLEESON, BSRV PRESIDENT.