

Living with Low Vision

by Sarah Feinbaum M.A., Orientation and Mobility Specialist

Low vision is a term used when describing a person who has difficulty seeing or reading. If you have low vision, you may benefit from visual aids that may increase your ability to see and your mobility.

To find out if you might benefit, begin with a low vision evaluation from an optometrist who has had special training to examine low vision patients. The exam is comprehensive. Patients should bring to the exam any magnifiers they use and an example of the printing they are able to read. It is also important for the doctor to know what activities the patient has enjoyed in the past, for example, knitting, playing cards, gardening, going to the movies, and so forth.

The exam consists of both information gathering and measurements:

- A detailed medical history of the patient and their family, including a complete eye history of diseases and treatments.
- An understanding of the patient's visual goals — what is important for the patient to see and do.
- A trial frame refractor exam in which a series of various types and strengths of lenses are tested by the patient. A new prescription may be ordered.
- An ocular health check, which includes testing magnifiers, monocular, a lighting evaluation, different shades of sun tinting for lenses, and other assessments not included in conventional eye exams.

When the exam is complete, the doctor will review the results and offer recommendations for adaptive living techniques or low vision aids.

Many different low vision aids are available. Magnifiers include:

- *Fixed focus.* These magnifiers have a fixed focal point with a built in light. They sit directly on the material to be read and are good for using in one's home. Many come with an optional electric adapter to replace battery operation.
- *Handheld, lighted.* These are non-fixed focus and are small enough to fit into a pocketbook or pocket, are battery powered and can either come with a halogen light or an LED light.
- *CCTV (Closed Circuit Television).* They can magnify up to 50 or 60 times and are primarily used for reading. They are self contained and not portable because of their size and weight.
- *Video magnifiers.* These can hook up to an existing television set or have their own reading screen. Also very effective, they enlarge print up to



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sixty times and can be used for distance viewing. Video magnifiers also allow users to work on small objects, or continue with hobbies. Some come with a mirror to assist with putting on make-up and fixing hair.

Colored lenses, added to a prescription or separately, are individually fitted to maximize vision by decreasing the amount of sun glare. They come in many colors.

Anyone with uncorrected acuity of 20/70 or more can benefit from a low vision exam.

Dr. Sandra Akamine provided low vision exam information. Her offices are in Riverside, California.

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