

Driving and eyesight

Good vision is crucial not only for safe driving but also to ensure that drivers are not putting themselves and others at risk unnecessarily. As changes in eyesight can occur gradually over time, it may not be immediately noticeable that there is a problem. We are concerned that many drivers are failing to look after their eyesight and are also unaware of their responsibility to report problems with their vision to the Driving and Vehicle Licensing Authority (DVLA). We are also concerned that the number plate test is not an appropriate assessment of drivers' vision. We believe the current system is therefore inadequate.

There is now a legislative opportunity with the implementation of the EU Directives on Driving Licences to strengthen the UK system. We are calling on the UK Government to replace the number plate test with a scientifically based screening programme of drivers' vision, before they apply for a licence and when they renew their licence every 10 years. This screening assessment would entail checking a driver's

distance vision, using the letter chart used by opticians and other optical equipment to check a driver's side vision. Drivers who have already had a recent eye test, which will involve a more extensive examination of the eyes, will not have to undergo a further assessment for driving.

Current system of assessing drivers' eyesight in the UK

At present, the legal eyesight requirement for driving is simply to be able to read a number plate at a distance of 20.5 metres. If the number plate has the narrower font, the distance is 20 metres. Drivers are required to undertake this check, wearing glasses or contact lenses if necessary, before taking their practical driving test. Drivers have three attempts to read the number plate correctly. Thereafter, the responsibility is on the driver to self-report to the DVLA if they believe that their vision does not meet this requirement. A driver is not legally required to state that their vision is adequate until they reach the age of 70. From this age, drivers receive a licence renewal form, which requires them to state that they are fit to drive, every three years thereafter. Currently it is only vocational drivers who are required to have their vision checked on a regular basis – when they renew their licence.

Inadequacies of the current system

- The distance number plate test has been in place since the 1930s and is therefore outdated. It has remained unchanged, despite increased numbers of vehicles on the roads, developments in road safety standards and clinical technology.
- The number plate test is not scientifically based and does not reflect modern day knowledge of vision. It is not standardised, nor validated, meaning that the results are not repeatable or consistent. This makes it an inappropriate method of determining whether a person has adequate vision to drive.
- The number plate test can be affected by environmental conditions. People can fail the test in different lighting or weather conditions. Some people who currently fail would be able to pass the test, if they had been prescribed glasses or contact lenses.
- A number of scientific publications have questioned the accuracy and reliability of the number plate test.^{1, 2, 3}
- Many drivers do not notice a gradual change in their vision and are therefore unaware that they fall below the required legal eyesight standard. Common eye conditions such as glaucoma may not have any symptoms until the condition is quite advanced. The NICE guidance on glaucoma states that “once vision loss becomes apparent up to 90% of optic nerve fibres may have been irrecoverably damaged.”⁴
- Self-reporting is reliant on all drivers knowing the required standard (the vast majority do not), realising they do not meet it, and being aware that it is a criminal offence not to notify the DVLA if they have a problem with their vision. Although lack of knowledge is not a defence in a court of law, there have been studies which show a widespread lack of awareness about the current vision standards and the legal implications of driving with poor vision. Even when drivers are aware they have poor vision they are often reluctant to admit that they fail to meet the standard.⁵
- The current system of checking drivers’ eyesight is insufficient to meet the harmonised European standards for drivers’ vision under Directive 2006/126/EC as amended by 2009/113/EC. The European Directives on Driving Licences contain new eyesight standards that drivers must meet to be fit to drive. The distance number plate test is not an accurate way of checking drivers meet these requirements.

1 Charman WN (1997) Vision and driving – a literature review and commentary. *Ophthalmic and Physiological Optics*, 17 371-391. This article found that the number plate test was not exactly comparable to a line on the letter chart used to assess vision by medical professionals.

2 Kiel AW, Butler T, Alwity A, (2003) Visual acuity and legal visual requirements to drive a passenger vehicle. *Eye*, 17 579-582

3 Currie Z, Bhan A, Pepper I, (2000) Reliability of Snellen charts for testing visual acuity for driving: prospective study and postal questionnaire. *BMJ* 321, 990-992

4 NICE CG85 Guideline (2009) *Diagnosis and management of chronic open angle glaucoma and ocular hypertension*

5 Box E, Gandolfi J, Mitchell K (2010) *Maintaining safe mobility for the ageing population*, RAC Foundation

Cost and benefit analysis

The cost of vision screening to drivers would be modest and minimal for the public sector. Screening could be available at a convenient location in the community, for example where other health or social care services are provided. In addition, the cost would only fall upon renewal of a driving licence – every ten years, and many drivers would have attended for an eye test in any case during that period. It is recommended that working age adults have regular eye tests every two years.

Introducing vision screening for all drivers would provide:

- a fairer, more scientific and validated system of screening drivers' vision;
- reassurance to the individual that not only they, but the total driving population, meet the required legal eyesight requirement to drive safely;
- a cultural change in drivers' minds and behaviour to reinforce the importance of good vision when driving (over the medium to long term);
- a lower number of minor and serious road accidents, which would result in reduced costs for the NHS, employers and drivers themselves, as well as a lower human cost with fewer lives lost and fewer injuries.

Next steps

The Eye Health Alliance and the Optical Confederation is willing to work with the Department for Transport, its agencies and the Department of Health, to raise awareness amongst all drivers of the importance of driving with good vision. The eye care sector is also willing to work with the Department to extend the current programme of vision screening for vocational drivers to all drivers.

Case studies

A pedestrian was killed by a 78 year old driver who was virtually blind. The man had macular degeneration which causes a gradual deterioration of sight loss. At the time of the accident his vision was not checked, it only came to light that he had poor vision after he admitted he had the condition to a probation officer. Road safety charities called for more regular eye tests for drivers to prevent further tragedies. (*Daily Mail*, 12 April 2010, Virtually blind driver jailed for killing pedestrian he could not see)

An HGV driver was charged this year with driving with poor eyesight after killing a cyclist in London. Family and friends of the victim called for an inquiry into cyclist safety after this tragic case. (*The Evening Standard*, 1 June 2010, Family of cyclist killed by truck call for HGV rush-hour ban)

Further information

Please contact the Eye Health Alliance

Email **info@eyehealthalliance.co.uk**

www.eyehealthalliance.co.uk