

Vision and driving

Good vision is essential for road safety. If you can't see properly, you can't drive safely.

Statistics show that one driver in 14 has a vision defect that may affect their driving.

If you think your eyesight may not be adequate, visit your health practitioner or optometrist and get it checked now. Your health practitioner could be your usual doctor (GP), a registered nurse or nurse practitioner, or a specialist if appropriate.

Don't wait until it's checked when you renew or apply for your driver licence.

How does vision affect driving?

You need different kinds of vision to be able to drive safely. These are explained below.

Distance vision

You have to be able to see clearly to drive safely. Even the simplest reactions can take 0.4 seconds. If your distance vision is poor, you may not see hazards until it's too late to react safely.

The faster you travel, the less time you have to see things and react to them. Poor distance vision and excessive speed can have disastrous results.

Distance vision can also be affected by the state of your windscreen and glasses. These should be kept clean and free of dust and scratches, which can greatly reduce vision on bright days and at night.

Field of vision (peripheral)

The ability to see to both sides is important. You need to be able to see cross traffic, pedestrians, and animals at the roadside, without having to look away from the road ahead. Make the best use of your side and rear view mirrors, and keep them adjusted correctly.

Depth perception

You need to be able to judge distances well to pass other vehicles and change lanes, especially in busy traffic. If you've recently lost the use of one eye you need to take extra care. You might need to stop driving for a while, until your vision has adjusted.

Accommodation (near vision focusing)

When you're driving, you need to look from the road to the dashboard and back again quite often. This ability to change focus from far to near is called accommodation or near vision focusing. Over the age of 45, most people have increasing difficulty with near vision, and may need glasses to see the dashboard instruments clearly.

Night vision

You need to be able to see in low and variable light conditions, and recover quickly from the glare of oncoming headlights. Glare recovery is best in drivers under the age of 30, and night vision can deteriorate after the age of 40.

Eyes are much slower to adapt to night-time light levels after they've been exposed to bright light. Being outside in the sun for only a few hours can slow the dark adaptation process, so you might not have your normal night vision for several hours after dark. You can avoid this temporary loss of night vision by wearing sunglasses during the day.

Some people find their night vision has deteriorated and they can't drive safely at night at all. It's possible to get a licence that allows you to drive in daylight only.

Colour vision

Colour plays an important part in road safety. Drivers must instantly recognise traffic lights, indicator signs, hazard warning lights and stop lights, and people with colour vision defects may react slower to them. Avoid using medium or dark blue sunglasses, because they can seriously interfere with some people's ability to distinguish traffic light colours.

Should an older motorist give up driving?

If you're an older driver, you must pay special attention to your vision and driving ability. As long as your health and vision permits, you can continue driving and keep your mobility and independence.

Safety recommendations

- Keep windscreens, glasses, sunglasses and lights clean.
- Frequently look in your rear vision mirrors and scan the verges of the road while you're driving.
- Keep your speed down if conditions reduce visibility.
- Use your sun visor on bright days and consider having a pair of tinted glasses made to your prescription.
- Never wear sunglasses for night driving.
- Avoid excessive speed.

Eyesight checks for driver licences

Your eyesight will be checked by a driver licensing agent:

- when you apply for a licence, a new licence class or a new licence endorsement
- each time you renew your licence.

The eyesight screen check aims to make sure you can see well enough to drive. It will pick up a blurry or 'lazy eye', or poor side vision. (The check isn't a full examination and shouldn't replace regular tests by a qualified optometrist or ophthalmologist.)

Eyesight requirements

You must prove that your eyesight is up to standard each time you apply for a new licence class or endorsement or renew your licence. You can:

- pass an eyesight screening check at a driver licensing agent, or
- present a satisfactory eyesight certificate or medical certificate (no more than 60 days old).

The certificate must be issued by a New Zealand registered optometrist or health practitioner. If you don't pass the eyesight check at an agent, you'll need to provide a certificate instead.

If you have sight in only one eye, or have only one eye (monocular vision) you'll need to present an eyesight certificate.

Can I wear glasses or contact lenses for the check?

Yes, but your licence will show that you need to wear them to drive. This is known as a 'licence condition'. (If the police catch you driving without your glasses or contact lenses, and you're required to wear them, you could be fined \$400.)

Don't wear reading glasses for the eyesight check. The six metre distance of the check isn't the range of standard reading glasses.

Should drivers with monocular vision have the check?

No. The eyesight screen check can't assess your eyesight if you have monocular vision (sight in one eye only). Drivers with monocular vision should go to their optometrist, ophthalmologist or health practitioner for an eyesight certificate.

What if I have a visual condition, such as cataracts?

While you may pass the eyesight screen check, depending on the level of your condition, at some stage your optometrist, ophthalmologist or health practitioner may recommend some driving restrictions (eg, no night driving or more frequent eyesight checks for driver licensing purposes). Ask your optometrist, ophthalmologist or health practitioner if you have any questions.

What if I fail the check?

If you don't pass the check, you'll be referred to an optometrist or ophthalmologist or health practitioner. You'll need to get an eyesight certificate and take it to the driver licensing agent (within 60 days) before you can get your licence.

The eyesight certificate (which can be part of a medical certificate) must:

- be issued by a registered optometrist, ophthalmologist or health practitioner, for example your usual doctor (GP), a registered nurse or nurse practitioner, or a specialist if appropriate
- be no more than 60 days old
- show you've met the required eyesight standard to be able to drive safely
- be the original certificate, not a copy.

Where you can find out more

- Email us: info@nzta.govt.nz.
- Call our contact centre: 0800 822 422.
- Write to us: NZ Transport Agency, Private Bag 11777, Palmerston North 4442.

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