Visual inattention following a stroke or head injury

Information for patients and relatives
Ophthalmology (Orthoptics)
This booklet is aimed at patients, and relatives/friends of patients, who have signs of visual inattention.

**What is visual inattention?**

Visual inattention is a condition commonly experienced by people who have had a stroke or head injury. It is also known as visual neglect or spatial inattention. Everything on one side of the visual world is ignored. The inattention is generally on the opposite side to the brain damage i.e. a stroke affecting the right side of the brain will lead to left sided visual inattention. Visual inattention can vary from being very mild to very severe.

Left visual inattention is more commonly reported. However, right visual inattention does occur but may recover more quickly or can be masked by language difficulties.

If your friend or relative has visual inattention they may additionally have a more general neglect, this is where they ignore or do not attend to one half of their body, again mainly the left side. As well as visual inattention they may also have a hemianopia (loss of vision to the same side), which they may be unaware of. For more information on hemianopia see our leaflet on ‘Visual field loss following stroke or head injury’.

**How can I tell if my friend or relative has visual inattention?**

People who have visual inattention may be unaware of anything or anyone on their affected side. They may hear you but will not look at you or acknowledge you until you move around to their non-affected side.

They may only eat one half of the food on their plate, struggle to read because half of the page is missing, and bump into people and objects on their affected side.
How can visual inattention affect day to day life?

The majority of people with visual inattention tend to be symptom free. The brain is unaware that the affected side exists and the individual is unaware that anything is wrong, so they deny that they have a problem.

Visual inattention can affect all aspects of daily life including:

- Ability to walk without bumping into objects.
- Losing sense of direction i.e. not taking the correct right or left turn when walking somewhere and getting lost.
- Crossing roads unsafely by not checking for oncoming traffic on the affected side.
- All aspects of self-care such as dressing, washing, shaving; they may only dress, wash, shave, etc the unaffected side.
- Reading does not make sense because they only read the text on the unaffected side e.g. only the right side of the page is read in left sided neglect.
- Telling the time as they only see one side of the clock face.

People with visual inattention are dependent on others for help, particularly to ensure they are safe. This can cause problems with rehabilitation and those affected often require a longer period of hospitalisation.
Can visual inattention be cured?

The mechanism for recovery of visual inattention is complex and is still not fully understood. In many people there is frequently good recovery from visual inattention. However when it is present, continued input from health care professionals and carers is important to promote awareness of the affected side.

What does the treatment for visual inattention involve?

Visual inattention is described as a disorder in 'looking' rather than 'seeing'. Orthoptic treatment involves looking to the affected side. This is done using eye exercises and encouraging the patient to 'look' or scan for objects on their affected side.

Strategies to help with reading and other tasks are discussed and used. Occasionally prisms, eye patches, mirrors and games may also be used.

What can be done at home to help someone with visual inattention?

A number of things can be done to help address visual inattention; these are all designed to make the person more aware of their affected side and attend to it better.

- Encourage visitors to sit on your friend/relative's affected side - hold their hand on the affected side to draw their attention to this side.
- Put interesting things more over to the affected rather than unaffected side.
- Put a line or tape down the left hand side of books or newspapers so they know where the line starts or ends. If they have right visual inattention put the line or tape down the right hand side of text so they know where the line ends.
• Put colourful lights on their affected side to draw their attention.
• Play any games, puzzles etc, including computer games, that will encourage attending to the affected side.
• It is important to place essential items such as food and drink on the unaffected side. The plate can be turned around if half of the food is not eaten due to not being seen.

Can someone with visual inattention drive?

No, it is not safe for someone with visual inattention to drive. If your relative or friend has visual inattention they will not be aware of anything on their affected side but often think their vision is normal. This makes it dangerous for them to drive. However each stroke is different and, depending on how well the visual inattention and other stroke related problems recover, some people are able to return to driving.

Where can I find more information about visual field loss?

If you would like to know more about visual field loss or have any questions or concerns, please contact the Orthoptic Stroke Service at the Royal Hallamshire Hospital on:

• 0114 271 3021
Additional help and advice is available from:

**The Stroke Association**

The Stroke Association provides a number of support services across the country to help those affected by stroke. When contacting them please include your postcode so they can direct you to local support where available.

**The Stroke Association UK**

- 0303 303 3100 (Mon-Fri, 9.00am - 5.00pm)
- info@stroke.org.uk
- www.stroke.org.uk

**Sheffield Stroke Association**

- 07717 275 705
- jane.hammond@stroke.org.uk

**Headway - the brain injury association**

**Headway Sheffield**

- 07849 338 380
- hello@headwaysheffield.co.uk
- www.headwaysheffield.org.uk

**Headway UK**

- 0808 800 2244 (Helpline)
- helpline@headway.org.uk
- www.headway.org.uk