

VISUAL SKILLS IN DRIVING

Regular care for our eyes is necessary for good visual health.

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Finding it hard to focus when you drive? It might be time to sharpen your visual skills. Even if you have perfect eyesight, you need regular care to maintain good eye health and vision.

So what exactly are visual skills? Our vision needs to be stabilised whenever we move our head and eyes. These visual functions are wired in the brain together with the neurological processes of binocular vision – the ability to use the two eyes together efficiently. We tend to take these abilities for granted, but care needs to be taken to ensure their proper function, which can be evaluated by specialised optometric tests.

Accurate focus and alignment of the two eyes are essential. This allows you to view objects clearly and direct your attention to the task effectively. In driving, you often have to watch the road and its surroundings. This involves a complex process of eye movement, depth perception (3D) and the

use of both central and peripheral vision.

Your eyes constantly move in concert with your head to check the mirrors and the road ahead in order to give you a clear view of the traffic condition. For most of us, this takes place very naturally through experience and constant practice. The eyes and the brain do this so intuitively, smoothly and efficiently that you do not even think about it.

But some drivers may find it a challenge to sustain their visual focus on the road. It can be particularly bad in situations that require simultaneous focusing and divided attention, and may consequently

cause the driver to lose focus on the road.

Deficiencies in visual skills may cause symptoms such as transient blurred vision, double vision, poor ability to locate objects accurately, light sensitivity, dizziness and disorientation. Some drivers may also be more affected by glare from street lights and oncoming headlights. This can lead to judgement errors

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on the roads, even for experienced drivers.

If you are often bothered by visual fatigue and eye strain, you should see an optometrist to get professional advice. Particularly at risk are those who have been in accidents and suffered whiplash injuries or concussions. Visual deficits can be present even where there are no physical injuries, and symptoms relating to mild to moderate traumatic brain injuries can persist for months or even years.

Most visual deficiencies can be treated with vision therapy, where specialised eye exercises are performed to remediate the deficit. Others, such as those with presbyopia, may benefit from wearing spectacles alone. In

recent years, spectacle lenses can even be optimised for driving, with viewing zones that allow fast refocusing between the road, dashboard and mirrors. An optometrist should be able to help in most instances.

