



Nystagmus *Network*®

Nystagmus and driving

The Nystagmus Network® is a registered
charity in England and Wales, number
1180450

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Thank you

Please note that during the coronavirus pandemic you are advised to use DVLA's digital services wherever possible rather than submitting paper applications for licences.

A full list of digital services and information on these services is available at [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk)

We may all soon be riding around in driverless vehicles, but until then we need to be clear about nystagmus and driving.

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Introduction

This booklet sets out the legal requirements for driving in the UK, examines safety and insurance concerns around driving with nystagmus and signposts to alternative transport opportunities.

This information booklet seeks to answer all your questions about driving with nystagmus. It is designed for young people applying for their first provisional licence, unsure whether they are eligible to drive, as well as experienced drivers concerned about any changes to their sight or who have recently acquired nystagmus. It explains how nystagmus might affect a person's vision and therefore their ability and eligibility to drive.

The Nystagmus Network is a registered charity in England and Wales providing support and information about the eye condition nystagmus. The charity was established in 1984. It provides support and information for people living with the condition and also promotes a better understanding of nystagmus. Through the charity's extensive involvement in research we are moving closer to finding effective treatments.

We hope this booklet will enable people with nystagmus to make an informed decision about whether they can legally and safely drive or not, without dashing hopes or raising false expectations.

The Nystagmus Network has a full range of information documents free to download from our [website](#).

“How do I contact the Nystagmus Network?”

Email: info@nystagmusnet.org

Tel: 01427 718093

Post: Nystagmus Network
70 Hyde Vale
London
SE10 8HP

Website:

www.nystagmusnetwork.org

Can I drive if I have nystagmus?

Getting a driving licence at the age of 17 is seen as a rite of passage for many young people, but can someone with nystagmus really learn to drive?

Nystagmus is a very complex condition and causes reduced vision. It is often accompanied by other sight difficulties which further impair vision. For this reason we can say that everyone's sight is affected differently, to a greater or lesser extent, and that no two cases are really the same. So, when it comes to driving and nystagmus, there is no simple answer.

Whilst there are people with nystagmus who drive safely and legally, many people who have nystagmus cannot see well enough to drive or choose not to because they would not feel safe.

As a society we often tend to spurn public transport and prefer to travel everywhere by car, regardless of the environmental effects. Having our own wheels represents freedom: freedom to get away from it all, to travel independently, to live and work wherever we want.

A parent who is told around the time of diagnosis of their child's nystagmus that they will probably never drive naturally finds this upsetting news and will worry about the limitations this may place on their future.

Nystagmus itself does not necessarily prevent you from having a driving licence, but the poor visual acuity and reduced field of vision usually associated with nystagmus mean that many people are not able to meet the minimum vision requirements.

The legal requirement for drivers and motor cyclists in the UK is that your vision is 0.3 Logmar or (6/12) Snellen



How may nystagmus affect my driving?

Nystagmus varies greatly between individuals and while some are able to drive, others may find their vision is affected so much by the nystagmus or other eye conditions that driving is not possible.

Some people with nystagmus can pass the DVLA sight test and read a car number plate from 20.5 metres. But this is not the only consideration. We know that nystagmus affects depth, speed and distance perception. This is why most people with nystagmus find it difficult to catch a ball coming towards them. It might also mean that the individual's judgement when driving would make them unsafe to drive.

Most people with nystagmus have a null point at which their vision is at its clearest. The null point is often off to the side or up or down. This means that the person's peripheral vision is limited which, again, is a risk factor when driving. Drivers need good peripheral vision.

So even if a person with nystagmus is legally allowed to drive, going ahead and taking to the road may not be the thing to do.

Apart from not being able to see as far as most people, nystagmus also affects your vision in other ways:

- you may take longer to see things than fully sighted people
- your reaction times may generally be slower
- if you have a null point, this can limit your peripheral vision
- your vision may vary, especially when you are tired, feeling unwell or under pressure or when light levels are bright or low
- you may struggle to estimate distances and how much space there is between your vehicle and other objects
- you may find it hard to judge the speed of other vehicles
- you may be more easily dazzled by bright sunlight or approaching head lamps
- your night vision may be reduced making driving in the dark challenging

Nystagmus is not a notifiable condition, but ...

Whether you are applying for your first provisional licence, have been driving for some time or need to renew your driving licence, it is a legal requirement to ensure that your vision meets the minimum standards.

There are a number of medical conditions which can affect your ability to drive. Nystagmus is one of these conditions. If you have nystagmus and want to drive (or already drive) and particularly, **if you acquire nystagmus and want to continue to drive**, you must make sure that your vision continues to meet the minimum requirements. Failure to do so could result in a fine. You may be prosecuted if you're involved in an accident as a result. Please see the section on the DVLA website about [Nystagmus and Driving](#). Rules apply to cars and motor cycles.

“Do I need to let the DVLA know that I have nystagmus?”

Provided your vision is at least 6/12, you can read a car licence plate from a distance of 20.5 metres and you have a good field of vision, you do not need to notify the [DVLA](#) that you have nystagmus. If you wear glasses or contact lenses to correct your distance vision, you must wear these at all times when driving.

Beware of any other health condition which may affect your driving and need to be reported to the DVLA. Find out more about notifiable health conditions by [clicking here](#).

Only a qualified optometrist or optician can confirm a person's level of vision, so, if you have nystagmus, you will need to have a sight test before getting behind the wheel of a car. The problem often arises that, because of the variable nature of nystagmus, a person can pass the required sight test for driving in the optometrist's office, but cannot read a car number plate on the day of the driving test. For this reason it is advisable to request a full DVLA sight test, which includes a field test and is available at Specsavers, before beginning to drive.

Find the UK government legal requirements for vision when driving on the [DVLA \(Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency\) website](#).



Driver & Vehicle
Licensing
Agency

You do not need to tell the DVLA if you have nystagmus, as long as you meet the standards of vision for driving. If you cannot read a car registration plate at the required distance of 20.5 metres, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses, you will not be able to hold a driving licence, take a test or learn to drive.

The legal position

In legal terms, having nystagmus does not prevent you from driving, but you must be able to meet certain statutory criteria.

To be able to drive you must be able to read a car number plate from a distance of 20.5 metres away. That's roughly the length of 2 double-decker buses parked one in front of the other.

You must also meet the minimum eyesight standard for driving by having a visual acuity of at least decimal 0.5 (6/12) on the Snellen scale (wearing glasses or contact lenses, if necessary) using both eyes together or, if you have sight in one eye only, in that eye. This means that you can read the third row up from the bottom of a sight test chart.

You must also have good peripheral vision. It is essential to be able to see all around when driving. An optician can test this.

Some people with nystagmus fall only just short of the driving test standard. It is not possible to improve the sight to get someone over the threshold. If a person is so close, however, that they can occasionally read the number plate, it might be worth checking that they have the best possible prescription for their glasses or contact lenses.

If someone's vision measures at least 6/12 in an optician's consulting room, it is still possible that they may not be able to read a car number plate reliably at 20.5 metres. Provided they are feeling calm and the light is good, there may be no problem. Taking a driving test is, however, often a stressful experience which can cause the nystagmus to become temporarily more severe, making the vision worse for a time. In addition, it may be a very cloudy or a very bright day, which could also adversely affect the vision.

It is worth bearing in mind that many people who have nystagmus and are legally allowed to drive are aware of their limitations.

IMPORTANT: You cannot legally hold a driving licence if you are registered as sight impaired.

Most people who have nystagmus and are legally able to drive are aware of their limitations. They realise that they must take more care than most drivers, just as fully sighted drivers do when driving in fog or other hazardous conditions. They also know that they may be putting themselves, their passengers, other road users, including motorists, cyclists and pedestrians, at risk.

Facts and figures

In 2018, DVLA figures for drivers with nystagmus are:

Licences issued: 64

Licence applications refused: 39

Licences surrendered: 2

As expected, most licence applications are received from those in the 16-20 age group.

"I've been interested in cars for as long as I can remember. Not being able to drive becomes more irritating as your friends start to take the driving test. However, you do learn to live with it. One way to look at things is that I will never be the designated driver for the pub!"

Insurance

Check your car insurance policy to see whether you need to tell your insurer that you have nystagmus. Failure to do so could invalidate any claims you make or which are made against you.

Hear what Richard and Will have to say about not having to drive in our [video](#), Nystagmus, the way we see it.

Not driving is not the end of the world. When you're 17 and your friends are learning to drive, when your job or college has to be on a bus route, or in later life when you want to keep your independence, it may seem tough, but there are advantages.

A report by KwikFit in June 2018 states that it costs the average UK motorist £162 per month to run their car, not including the purchase price.

You can apply for a disabled Person's Railcard and enjoy a third off most train fares for yourself and an accompanying passenger. Find out more from the [disabled person's rail card website](#).

Other advantages of not driving include never having to be the designated driver for the pub, not having to spend hours every day in traffic and never having to worry about where to park.

If you are registered Sight Impaired or Severely Sight Impaired you may be entitled to reduced fares or even **free** public transport. Ask your local council or transport provider. In London you can apply for a [Freedom Pass](#).

Please note that driving rules are different in other countries. In the USA, for example, where driving conditions can be very different from the UK, people with poor vision drive using small binoculars or bioptics on their spectacles. Bioptics are not permitted to drivers in the UK.

The Nystagmus Network relies entirely on membership subscriptions, fundraising, donations and gifts in wills to continue its important work, providing support and information to the nystagmus community, raising awareness and funding research.

If you have found this free document useful, please consider [making a donation](#) to the charity today through [CAFDonate](#). Thank you.

If you would like to join the Nystagmus Network as a member, you can find out more about the benefits of membership [here](#).

Contact the Nystagmus Network

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