



What is visual impairment?

The term 'visual impairment' (VI) refers to any condition which interferes with vision, including total blindness. International definitions of blindness have varied from 'total lack of sight' to functional definitions such as 'those persons who require social services as a result of their vision problems'. Consequently the term 'vision/visual impairment' has become more generally accepted than the term 'blindness' as it includes a greater range of vision problems.

Causes of visual impairment

Retinitis pigmentosa Is caused by a genetic deviation which results in a non-inflammatory progressive degeneration of the retina. The pigment of the retina begins to disappear, which results in a narrowing of the visual field from the outside and leads to "tunnel vision". A common symptom is night blindness. This is the most common cause of blindness in SA..

Glaucoma occurs when fluid in the eye puts pressure on the optic nerve, often leading to limitations in the field of vision and in some cases total blindness.

Cataract This condition results in partial or total opacity of the lens. It is a progressive condition and if left untreated can result in blindness. The condition is primarily hereditary, but can occur to any individual.

Albinism is a congenital hereditary condition resulting in partial or total absence of normal pigmentation. The effects of this are unique to each individual, but can result in total blindness.



Detached retina occurs when the inner layers of the retina are separated from the pigment epithelium. It can result from accumulation of fluids or blood, the presence of a tumour or severe blows to the head or eye. It results in distortion of visual images, blind spots and/or loss of sight on one side.



How can visual impairment be managed?

There are many ways in which someone with a visual impairment or complete blindness can be independent. Organisations provide orientation and mobility training which teaches the person how to do basic daily tasks and find their way about independently. Other assistance includes a white cane, a guide dog, braille, audio descriptions, smartphone apps as well as other technologies with a wide variety of use.