

Treating the Blind

Objectives

After reading this article you will be able to:

1. Define how many people in the US are blind or visually impaired.
2. List the causes of the majority of blindness cases.
3. Discuss the communication techniques used when communicating with blind patients.
4. Explain how to walk with a blind patient.
5. Discuss where guide dogs are usually permitted and how to transport them.
6. Discuss the consequences of visual impairment.

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Except for their visual impairment, blind patients are normal and want to be treated as such.

However, special considerations must be made for those who are visually impaired. Guide dogs, for instance must be allowed to go with the patients, as they may be an important part of any rehabilitation effort. It must also be remembered that just because a patient is visually impaired, does not mean that they are unable to provide information which is vital to assessing any other patient.

As with any patient, procedures must be explained prior to administering them. This does not mean, that the procedure must be explained in a louder or slower voice than would be normally used. The goal, secondary to providing quality treatment, is making the patient feel comfortable with your perception of them.

Many blind and visually impaired individuals, as well as those with other forms of handicaps, often feel that they are treated inappropriately, rudely or even insultingly. Such mistreatment is rarely, if ever, intentional but more likely arises out of ignorance or lack of understanding on the part of rescue personnel. As a result of mistreatment, the blind patient may become agitated, anxious and upset, thus aggravating the problem that caused him/her to call in the first place. Confidence in providers will be lost, thus compromising their ability to provide effective treatment.

The purpose of this article is to provide pre-hospital personnel with some basic information about blindness and visual impairment so that they can more effectively deal with patients with these conditions.

There are approximately 5 million people in the United States who are blind or seriously visually impaired. Although blindness can occur at any age, to a large degree it most commonly affects the elderly, and since the size of that population is increasing rapidly, the number of blind people will continue to

increase as well. Blindness is caused by many different diseases and conditions, but the majority of cases are the result of glaucoma, macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy. While more frequently seen in the elderly, these conditions have also been known to cause blindness in young people. Other causes of blindness include trauma and tumors.

Visual impairment is one of three basic types. The most common consists of vision blurred to a degree that cannot be corrected with lenses or other treatment. The patient will be able to tell light from dark, detect movement and possibly identify objects and people at very close range. Reading, except for very large letters, is all but impossible.

Other types of visual impairment can result in either the loss of central or peripheral vision. When central vision is lost, it may be possible to see fairly well peripherally, thus causing the patient to sometimes look at you sideways. The loss of peripheral vision may mean that the patient has only limited straight-ahead vision, sometimes reduced to what is known as pinpoint vision. While some vision is retained by patients with peripheral or central visual impairment, it is usually ineffective for driving, carrying out many normal day-to-day functions or reading.

In dealing with blind patients it is important to understand at the outset that except for their visual impairment, they are normal people and want to be treated as such. Blind people want to be treated like everyone else and want to be respected.

While blind people may need and sometimes want assistance, they do not want to be made to feel helpless nor completely dependent on others. Communication is really the key. Speak directly to the blind patient, face to face, in a normal tone of voice, and use the patient's name so he'll know you are addressing him. Basically, your conversation should be no different from what it would be with a sighted patient. Always

explain in advance what you are going to do. Never surprise a blind patient with an IV catheter in the arm or by removing clothing to conduct your assessment. It is easy to understand how a patient would be startled and upset by such conduct. Most of us are in the habit of explaining procedures to our patients, but keep in mind that an explanation to a blind person may require a little more detail.

Once you have made contact with your patient, do not leave without letting him/her know. Remember that you can't be seen, and if the patient starts speaking to you, believing that you are there, and receives no response, it could be disturbing. Similarly, you should advise the patient of your return. If another person enters or leaves the ambulance, let your patient know who it is and what is happening. Introduce other

members of the crew to the patient, giving special attention to those who will be directly involved in patient care. Many blind people have guide dogs who assist them with travel and are close companions. All states have laws that permit the dogs to go almost anywhere, even where dogs are normally not allowed. It is not only permissible to allow guide dogs in ambulances and hospitals, but in many states it is illegal to exclude them unless there is solid justification. If for some reason you cannot take the dog in the ambulance, to relieve your patient's concern and to enable him/her to be reunited with the dog as soon as possible, make sure that someone makes arrangements for the dog's care. If the dog is transported in the ambulance, tell it to lie down wherever you deem convenient, and it will most likely do so. Guide dogs are taught that a harness signifies a time to be serious. If the dog is injured, every effort should be made to see that prompt veterinary attention is arranged. Often, the police will transport injured dogs to a veterinary hospital if no one else is available. Remember the importance of these dogs to their owners. Guide dogs are highly trained and not easily replaced. The loss of a dog is not just the loss of a companion. To a person who has grown to rely on a guide dog, its loss would mean a dramatic change in his/her life. If the patient uses a cane, that too should go to the hospital. In examining a blind or visually impaired person, be aware that some, despite their loss of vision, may be very sensitive to bright light on their eyes. Before using your penlight to inspect the eyes, make sure to tell your patient. It is also important to realize that while the eyes will often appear and react normally, there are many instances when this will not be the case. Depending on the cause of the blindness and other health problems, pupils will sometimes not react to light, may appear unequal or may be unusual in color.

When walking your blind patient to or from the ambulance, do not grab or push him/her, but allow the patient to take your arm above the elbow. This

is how they feel most comfortable. Stairs or steps should be approached squarely, not from an angle. Warn the patient vocally of terrain irregularities like holes, loose rocks, curbs or water, and let him/her know when you are changing directions.

Dealing with blind and visually impaired people requires nothing more than patience, consideration and common sense. By following the simple suggestions given here, you should have little trouble in providing effective and caring treatment.