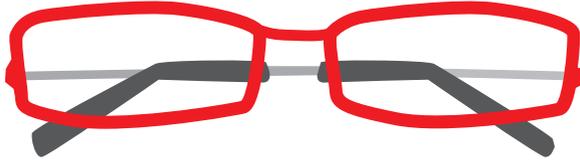




**UNFORGOTTEN
FORCES**

Supporting Scotland's
Older Veterans



Combating Sight and Hearing Loss



**Advice for older people with
a military service background**



SCOTTISH WAR-BLINDED

Foreword

The world is an ever more complex place in which to live and change is a constant theme. As one gets older, so it becomes more challenging to keep abreast of the changes and feel comfortable as one's own needs change.

Age Scotland, Action on Hearing Loss Scotland, and Scottish War Blinded (as partners in the Unforgotten Forces consortium), have put together this practical guide for older veterans who are living with sensory loss, primarily sight and hearing.

The guide details in clear concise language the advice and support available, and goes a long way in helping point individuals in the right direction. I am sure it will prove to be a welcome addition to the information already available to those living with these conditions and to the health professionals and family members supporting them.

I have been hugely impressed by the collaborative work of Unforgotten Forces since its launch in 2017, and this guide is a great example of how charities are coming together to provide more flexible and effective support for our veterans.

I commend the guide to you and hope you find it provides the answers you need.



A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Charlie Wallace'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Charlie Wallace
Scottish Veterans Commissioner



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Introduction

As people get older sight and hearing may be affected as part of the natural ageing process. Sometimes because of military service an older person will have worse problems with sight or hearing than might otherwise have been the case.

This guide will provide useful tips and information for problems with sight or hearing. It is written with military veterans in mind and highlights additional help for them. Much of that help is available regardless of whether the sight or hearing loss is related to previous military service.

Military veterans include regulars, reservists, national servicemen and those in the merchant navy who have sailed in support of a United Kingdom military operation. One day's service and one day's pay is sufficient for someone to be considered a British military veteran.

This publication has been produced by Action on Hearing Loss Scotland, Scottish War Blinded and Age Scotland through Unforgotten Forces, a partnership of 15 leading organisations delivering a range of new and enhanced services for older veterans in Scotland. Unforgotten Forces is supported by the Covenant Fund Trust funded by the Chancellor using LIBOR funds.

2019 Edition

The Age Scotland Helpline can provide information and advice, relevant leaflets or the details of an organisation that could help you. If there is anything you need to know which is not covered in this guide, call **Age Scotland's helpline** on **0800 12 44 222**. This booklet is intended as a guide only and is not a full and definitive statement of the law.

Sight loss explained

The older we get, the more likely it is that we will have a vision impairment. One in eight people age 75 or older, and one in three people age 90 or older, live with sight loss. Age can make us more sensitive to glare, and it can also take us longer to adjust to changes in the light. You may be less able to see contrasts between colours, and colours may appear more muted. You may find you need to use glasses or antiglare spectacles more often.

Some changes in vision are normal, are low risk in terms of our health, and can be corrected with glasses and contact lenses. But as we get older there is a greater risk of a number of age related eye conditions. These include cataract, glaucoma and macular degeneration. Conditions such as these can occur alongside normal age-related changes to vision. Health issues like a stroke and diabetes can also affect your sight.

These conditions can be easily diagnosed by eye tests (see 'Getting your Eyes Checked' on page 4). Early diagnosis can make a big difference, for example glaucoma can be treated to prevent further sight loss. If you are diagnosed with a sight loss condition you may be offered an opportunity to be registered as sight impaired or severely sight impaired. This can help you access additional support.



The signs of sight loss

People with sight loss may:

- Find reading more difficult
- Find bright or low light problematic
- Have difficulty adjusting to changes in light (dark to light and vice versa)
- Find they are seeing less well with their existing glasses
- Find they are knocking items over more often, or missing steps or stairs (spatial awareness problems)
- Find they are less good at recognising people
- Have more difficulty finding things

There are a number of other signs of sight loss, including tearing, red eye, or blurred vision.

If you experience any of these signs it is important that you have your eyes tested.

Getting your eyes checked

An optometrist or optician will provide a free annual eye health check for everyone in Scotland over the age of 60. It is important that you have your eyes checked annually or any time you feel there is a problem with your eyes.

Many eye conditions are treatable. Many can be prevented. An eye health check will help to detect any developing eye conditions at an early stage. It will also identify if you need glasses, or whether your current sight prescription is correct.

When you visit the optician you should take with you:

- Your GP contact details
- Copies of your prescription for any medications you are taking
- Your current glasses (if you wear them)
- Your hand-held magnifier (if you use one)

The optician will ask you about:

- Any medical or health issues - if you have diabetes you should have an eye check every year to look for signs of an eye condition called diabetic retinopathy
- Your eye history, and any eye problems in your family
- Any falls you've had - you can ask your optician about how you can reduce your risk of falls, particularly if you wear bifocals or varifocals.

Living well with sight loss

Tips for living well with sight loss:

- If you wear glasses, keep them clean. Make sure they fit well and wear the right glasses for the right task.
- If you have been prescribed medication for an eye condition, make sure you take it - especially if you need eye drops.
- If your eyes have become more sensitive to light, sunglasses or antiglare glasses can protect your eyes from sunlight.
- Look after your general health: don't smoke, keep active and enjoy a healthy diet. This can help you live well with sight loss, and reduces the risk of some eye conditions.



Extra help for veterans with sight loss

Scottish War Blinded gives free support to ex-service men and women whose sight loss is having an impact on their independence - no matter if they lost their sight during or after service.

Most of the charity's one thousand members, across all areas of Scotland, have age-related sight loss such as macular degeneration. Scottish War Blinded provides practical, emotional and financial support which enables members to be as independent as possible. Members are given opportunities to learn skills that will help them adapt to sight loss. The support for members, and for their families, is free and lifelong.

The charity's locally-based Outreach Workers are the initial point of contact for veterans with sight loss, and for their families. They work with each individual to identify what support would be beneficial to them.

The support available includes:

- Information and advice on living with sight loss
- Expert rehabilitation, mobility and independent living guidance
- Specialist equipment to help veterans live in their own homes
- Linking veterans with other services that may be able to assist them such as benefits advice
- Social events and activities throughout Scotland.

Support is available in the veteran's own home, and some people are able to attend the charity's activity centres in West Lothian and Renfrewshire.

If you or someone you know could benefit from the support provided by **Scottish War Blinded** call free on **0800 035 6409** or contact the charity online at **enquiries@scottishwarblinded.org**.

Practical aids for sight loss

Specialist equipment often enables someone with sight loss to live independently. For some the right advice and small pieces of equipment, such as daylight bulbs, can help them to manage at home. For others, a specialist assessment by a rehabilitation officer is undertaken, to advise on and ensure appropriate equipment and support for the individual's needs. Scottish War Blinded provides all these services.

Scottish War Blinded can provide a range of equipment including:

- Daylight bulbs and lamps
- Talking watches
- Liquid level indicators (for filling cups)
- Hand-held electronic magnifiers
- Hand-held illuminated magnifiers
- Text readers / scanners
- CCTV magnifiers

Should a member's eyesight worsen, specialist staff visit them at home to re-assess their needs. If necessary, the charity will provide them with new equipment so they can live independently for as long as possible.



Sight loss – a veteran’s story

Isa, age 88, first experienced sight loss problems in her mid-eighties.

“It came on quite quickly. I just couldn’t see. It was as though there was something on my eyes, and I was rubbing them to try and get rid of it.”

A couple of weeks later she visited her GP and was referred to the Royal Alexandra Hospital, which diagnosed macular degeneration. A quick medical referral gave her answers about the causes of her condition, but little else. “After the hospital treatment I didn’t see anyone, and I was left to cope alone.”

The council sensory impairment team visited Isa and referred her to Scottish War Blinded. Over the following year she was visited by an Outreach Worker and benefited from home visits from the charity’s local rehabilitation officer, who provided guidance and a CCTV reader that enabled Isa to continue her hobby of knitting.

Then Scottish War Blinded’s Hawkhead Centre opened in Paisley. “At first I thought it wasn’t for me, I told them I was too old. Now the Hawkhead drivers come and pick me up and drop me home again each week, which is great.”

She is involved with “everything”; from yoga, to art and crafts activities, to social music groups. “Around the house I’m fine, but I’m not confident to go outside on my own other than to the shop across the road so I love going to the centre. It’s smashing.”

With support from the centre’s Rehabilitation Officer she has also benefitted from equipment, including cup levels that enable her to make a cup of tea at home, and a talking watch to keep track of the time.



Hearing loss and tinnitus explained

The causes of hearing loss vary but the most common type is age-related, which is caused by wear and tear to tiny sensory cells known as hair cells in the cochlea (your hearing organ in your inner ear). More than 55 percent of people aged over 60, and more than 70 percent of people over 70, have a degree of hearing loss.

Age-related hearing loss results in a gradual reduction in your ability to hear; especially high-frequency sounds such as women's or children's voices or birdsong.

In Scotland around one in six people have some form of hearing loss.

On average it is about ten years from the time that someone first notices hearing difficulties before they get their hearing tested. For hearing aids to be most effective, however, they are best fitted as soon as possible to reduce the impact of the brain needing to re-learn sounds that have not been heard for many years.

Older veterans who were exposed to loud noise from small arms fire, artillery, engines, other machinery or explosives may have noise-induced hearing loss, if they served at a time when adequate hearing protection was not available.

People who have noise-induced hearing loss may also experience tinnitus, which is the sensation of hearing ringing, hissing, buzzing, whistling or humming when there is no external sound. Tinnitus can often go away after a few minutes or hours, but persistent, severe forms of the condition can be experienced indefinitely and impact on sleep, concentration, stress levels and mental health.

While there is currently no cure for tinnitus, health professionals can offer solutions including hearing aids, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or counselling which may alleviate distress people suffer. Sound therapy products and self-management techniques can also help reduce the impact of tinnitus in everyday life.



The signs of hearing loss

People with hearing loss often:

- Have problems hearing other people's speech
- Need to have words or phrases repeated to them
- Struggle to hear people speaking on the telephone
- Listen to the TV or radio at a very high volume
- Struggle to follow conversations in noisy environments
- Become withdrawn from social interactions.

Getting your hearing checked

If you think you may need a hearing test, ask your GP to refer you to your local audiology department. Hearing tests (audiometry) last about 20 minutes and the results will be shown on a chart called an audiogram.

Digital hearing aids are available free from the NHS or you may choose to purchase devices from private hearing aid companies. The Royal British Legion's Veterans Hearing Fund (VHF) provides financial support for veterans who acquired hearing loss during service and may fund hearing aids, assistive equipment or lip-reading classes.

Hearing aids last, on average, five years. New batteries and other maintenance are free for NHS hearing aids. If buying privately, check the maintenance arrangements in the contract.

If you have NHS hearing aids you should be issued with a yellow booklet giving details of the type of hearing aid and how it works. Keep this booklet safe as you will need it for follow-up appointments.

You should get your hearing tested every three years to check whether your hearing has deteriorated, and also to see whether you can benefit from using updated hearing aids or other technology which have become available.



Living well with hearing loss

Tips for communication if you have hearing loss:

- Ask people to ensure they have your attention before speaking to you
- Always face the person you are talking to, and ask them to face you
- Ask anyone shouting at you to speak at a lower volume, so that their mouth shape is not distorted and you may be able to lip-read them. You may also need to ask them to speak with you in a well-lit environment.
- Encourage people to use plain language and not waffle or change the subject without warning
- Ask people to write things down, if this would help you
- If you don't understand what someone says, ask them to say it in a different way
- Minimise background noise by asking to speak in a quiet environment. If possible, use soft furnishings, such as padded tablecloths and carpeted floorings, which can help absorb sound in places you regularly have conversations.
- If you use a hearing aid, ask your NHS audiologist, or private provider, for information about how to use your device in conjunction with hearing loops which can be installed in rooms or be portable. Hearing loops work through a microphone picking up the sounds of speech and an amplifier processing the audio for output through a metal coil (or loop) as a magnetic signal. A switch or button on your hearing aid can disengage its microphone so that it only receives sound going in to the loop's microphone.



Extra help for veterans who have hearing loss or tinnitus

Action on Hearing Loss Scotland's Hearing Forces service provides veterans aged 65 and over, and their families and carers, with life-enhancing information and support to help cope with hearing loss or tinnitus.

The service's staff and volunteers, who have been trained by NHS audiologists, offer basic maintenance on NHS hearing aids, information about ways to reduce the impacts of tinnitus and advice about assistive equipment, such as amplified telephones or personal listeners, which can make everyday life easier.

Crucially, the service informs you about what issues and questions to raise with your audiologist so that, through your individual management plan, you can be provided with hearing aids which are programmed to meet your individual needs.

It can take time to adjust to using a hearing aid, but it's important to persevere and ask for support if you are having difficulty working the controls, or if it feels uncomfortable in your ear.

Hearing Forces provides new hearing aid batteries as well as the opportunity to have your NHS hearing aids cleaned or re-tubed. Re-tubing your hearing aids should be done every three to six months, or earlier if the tubing is hard/brittle, split or blocked by earwax. The tubing needs to remain flexible to help sound travel from the hearing aid in to your ear.

The running time of batteries depends on your hearing aid type, its amplification and how many hours your device is used each day, but generally they last seven to ten days.

If you or someone you know could benefit from the support provided by **Action on Hearing Loss Hearing Forces Service** call or text **07388 227407** or contact the charity online at **Hearing.Forces@hearingloss.org.uk**.



Practical aids for living with hearing loss

Conversation amplifier

Conversation amplifiers can help you hear speech, television and radio more clearly, while reducing background noise. They are suitable for people with moderate to severe hearing loss and can be used with or without hearing aids.

Television listener

TV listeners offer people with up to severe hearing loss the chance to enjoy their television listening experience with clear sound. They can also be used as a conversation listener using the internal microphone, making it easy to switch listening between the TV and people around you.

Phone amplifier

Phone amplifiers can be plugged into your existing corded phone and you can adjust the volume and tone of phone calls to suit your hearing needs.

Tinnitus aids

There are devices that offer sound therapy treatment with relaxing and soothing sounds helps to reduce stress, which is linked to tinnitus.

Portable flashing doorbell chime

A loud doorbell with a bright flashing light to alert people who are deaf or very hard of hearing.



Hearing loss – a veteran’s story

RAF veteran John, age 76, was diagnosed in his mid-50s with hearing loss and tinnitus. These were as a result of being exposed to loud noise during his military service, at a time when adequate hearing protection was unavailable.

John asked Action on Hearing Loss Scotland’s Hearing Forces service for support to help him make best use of his NHS hearing aids, including how he might link them up with various pieces of assistive technology.

Hearing Forces informed him about battery provision, how to look after his hearing aids, the importance of getting them re-tubed and how he could adjust the settings.

As a result John now wears his hearing aids more often, having become confident in how to operate them. He can now hear conversations with his wife, family and friends more clearly.

Hearing Forces referred John to the local fire service for a smoke alarm and to his local council’s Sensory Impairment Team so that he could be supplied with a telephone amplifier, personal listener and flashing doorbell to help him live a more independent life and stay socially connected.



Health problems related to sight and hearing loss

Falls

If you have poorer levels of vision then you may have difficulty negotiating steps or uneven ground. Poor vision also affects balance, co-ordination and mobility.

People with hearing loss can also have problems with balance which increase the risk of falls.

Dementia

People with mild hearing loss have nearly twice the risk of developing dementia compared to people with normal hearing, and the risk increases for people with more severe hearing loss.

People living with dementia may have problems with their sight caused by their dementia. They may have difficulty making sense of what they see because of brain damage, rather than a problem with their eyes.



Further help and support

There are many local services and a range of organisations that offer support for people with sight or hearing loss.

Scottish War Blinded

Tel: **0800 035 6409**

Email: **enquiries@scottishwarblinded.org**

Website: **www.royalblind.org/scottish-war-blinded**

Action on Hearing Loss Scotland's Hearing Forces Service

Tel: **07388 227407**

Email: **Hearing.Forces@hearingloss.org.uk**

Website: **www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/Scotland**

Age Scotland Helpline

A free, confidential phone service for older people, and their carers and families, in Scotland.

Tel: **0800 12 44 222**

Website: **www.agescotland.org.uk**



**Age Scotland and the
Age Scotland Veterans' Project**

0333 323 2400
veteransproject@agescotland.org.uk
www.agescotland.org.uk/veterans

Age Scotland helpline
0800 12 44 222

Age Scotland Enterprises
0800 456 1137



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SCOTTISH WAR BLINDED

Scottish War Blinded works within communities across Scotland to support military veterans in meeting the challenges of sight loss, no matter the cause.



Action on Hearing Loss Scotland is a charity which helps people who are deaf, have hearing loss or tinnitus – including older veterans – to live the life they choose by providing person-centred support which meets their individual needs.



Age Scotland, part of the Age Network, is an independent charity dedicated to improving the later lives of everyone on the ageing journey, within a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in Scotland. Registration Number 153343. Charity Number SC010100.