

## What is a visual field examination?

A visual field examination is a test designed to find out how well your peripheral vision is functioning. Reading an eye chart tests how well your visual system is working in the central area but provides little information about your side vision. A visual field examination tests both your central vision and your peripheral vision by measuring the sensitivity of your visual system in various positions.

## Why is peripheral vision important?

Central vision allows you to see the fine details of the objects at which you are looking directly but peripheral vision is used to find objects and detect threats, and is important for general orientation and balance. For example, if you have poor vision on one side, you may tend to bump into doorframes and driving may be very dangerous if you cannot see traffic in the next lane.

In sport, peripheral vision is necessary to be able to locate other players on a court or field and to see the ball out of the corner of your eye.

Peripheral vision is also important For other tasks such as reading. A person with poor vision on the right side may find it difficult to read a line of type, as they cannot see the next word in the line. A person with poor vision on the left side may be able to read along the line but can have problems finding the start of the next line.

## What causes visual field defects?

Visual field defects can be caused by anything that damages or interferes with any part of the visual system. Causes of visual field defects include injuries or diseases of the retina (the light-sensitive layer of cells at the back of the eye), and diseases such as glaucoma, which damage the optic nerve that carries signals from the eye to the brain. Other causes are strokes and other brain injuries that damage the regions of the brain involved with processing vision.

Damage to different parts of the visual system causes different types of visual field defects. This makes visual field examinations a very useful way of detecting and diagnosing many diseases.

How does a visual field examination work? There are several ways of testing visual fields but most commonly a computerised instrument called an automated perimeter is used. This consists of a concave bowl with a system that allows lights to be flashed at various points inside the bowl. The brightness of the lights varies and is controlled by a computer.

When your visual fields are being tested, you sit facing into the bowl with your head resting on a support so that your head will not move. One eye at a time is tested, so an eye-patch is worn over the eye not being tested. You look directly at a light in the centre of the bowl and press a button any time you see a light flash elsewhere in the bowl. The computer varies the brightness of the test lights and notes whether you saw the lights and responded by pressing the button. This allows the sensitivity of the visual system at each point to be measured.

## Tips for visual field examinations

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Remember to keep looking at the light in the centre of the bowl. This will keep your eye still. If your eye is moving around, it is not possible to tell which part of the visual field is being tested.

Do not worry if you do not seem to be seeing many lights.

To test the sensitivity of your visual system, the instrument has to

flash some lights that are too dim for you to see. A person with completely normal visual fields usually will not see about onethird of the lights.

Press the response button any time you think you see a light in the bowl. It is better to respond immediately, even if you are wrong, than to be too cautious and not press the button when the light flashes.

Remember to blink occasionally to ensure that your eyes do not become dry. The best time to blink is just after you have pressed the button to show that you saw a light flash. There will be a short delay before the next light is presented.

#### Medicare rebate

The Federal Government recognises the importance of visual field testing for the long-term health of your eyes and pays a Medicare benefit for examinations.

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