

CLEAR VISION, SAFE DRIVING

As a minimum legal requirement, motorists must be able to read in good light (and with the aid of glasses or contact lenses, if necessary) a car number plate* from 20 metres away – that's about five car lengths. This test is normally only carried out officially at the time of the driving test and again for licence renewal at the age of 70. You must also have a 120 degree wide field of view.

In law it is a driver's responsibility to ensure that they can pass the number plate test at all times. They must also be able to see clearly out of the corners of their eyes, see clearly at night and not suffer uncontrolled double vision.

It's important to remember that if you fail to meet these visual standards you are breaking the law every time you start your engine.

For drivers, the importance of having a regular eye examination (at least once every two years) is obvious, particularly bearing in mind that people's eyesight changes over time.

If you do need to wear spectacles or contact lenses to meet the visual standard for driving, it's vital to ensure you wear them every time you drive.

This may sound obvious but every day tens of thousands of motorists drive without their glasses because of vanity, or because they have forgotten them, or because they are only driving a short distance.

No matter what the reason, these people are breaking the law and are a potential danger to themselves and other road users.

Essential checks

To help you see the road ahead more clearly, ensure that your windscreen is clean and scratch-free, both inside and out, make sure that the headlamp glass is clean, the bulbs are working and your lights are properly adjusted to provide good road illumination while not causing glare for other road users.

Look slightly to the left of oncoming traffic to avoid suffering from glare which can take time to recover from.

Drivers' eyewear

Some spectacles are better than others for driving, with rim-less designs or those with thin rims being particularly suitable as they allow greater all-round vision than those with heavy frames.

Spectacles with plastic lenses are lighter and safer. Anti-reflection coatings can be applied to any lenses at a reasonable cost, helping you to see more clearly and cut down on glare, especially at night.

Make sure you keep your spectacles and contact lenses clean at all times – it's best to keep a cleaning cloth in the car. Keeping a spare pair in the car will mean you never forget them!

This is also important if you normally wear contact lenses because on long journeys when your eyes get tired wearing specs may be more comfortable. It's also a useful safeguard if you suffer from hay fever.

It's worth remembering that in some countries it's a legal requirement to keep a spare pair of glasses or contact lenses in the car. Always check local laws before you travel.

Sunglasses

If you need prescription glasses to drive, never replace them with non-prescription sunglasses when it's sunny – it's dangerous and you will be breaking the law.

Instead, get a pair of prescription sunglasses or clip-on lenses over your prescription lenses. When using clip-ons make sure you check their suitability for plastic lenses.

The Highway Code says that you should never use tinted glasses at night. Nor should you use them in poor visibility eg: heavy rain, fog and snow. This rule also applies to sunglasses and tinted motorcycle helmets.

Drink and drugs

There are factors that can impair a driver's eyesight temporarily. For example, alcohol can reduce your vision as well as slowing your reactions to potentially dangerous situations and can cause drowsiness even when the driver is below the legal alcohol limit.

Some drugs or medicines can also reduce or impair vision so you should always check a prescription is safe for driving.

Tiredness, particularly on long journeys can reduce your ability to see clearly.

Continuing responsibility

Any driver who thinks their eyesight does not meet the legal requirements must tell the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) immediately. It is a criminal offence to fail to notify the DVLA of any eyesight conditions likely to cause a driver to be a source of danger to other road users.

This applies to those suffering from cataracts, glaucoma, diabetes or any other relevant medical conditions, which constitute a notifiable disability.

If a driver is involved in an accident and is then found to have an undeclared notifiable disability, insurance cover could be at risk. Having a notifiable eyesight condition does not necessarily mean that you will be banned from driving.

If you think you have a notifiable eyesight condition (including cataracts, macular degeneration, glaucoma etc) you should write to: Drivers Medical Group, DVLA, Swansea SA99 1DL or Telephone 0870 600 030 for advice.

The medical assessors at the DVLA will then do one of the following:

- Allow you to keep your licence without restriction.
- Issue you with a licence for one, two or three years, in order to keep a regular check on your condition.
- Refuse or withdraw your licence.

Leaflet published Eye Health UK (charity number 1086146)
www.eyehalthuk.org 0845 128 5007

