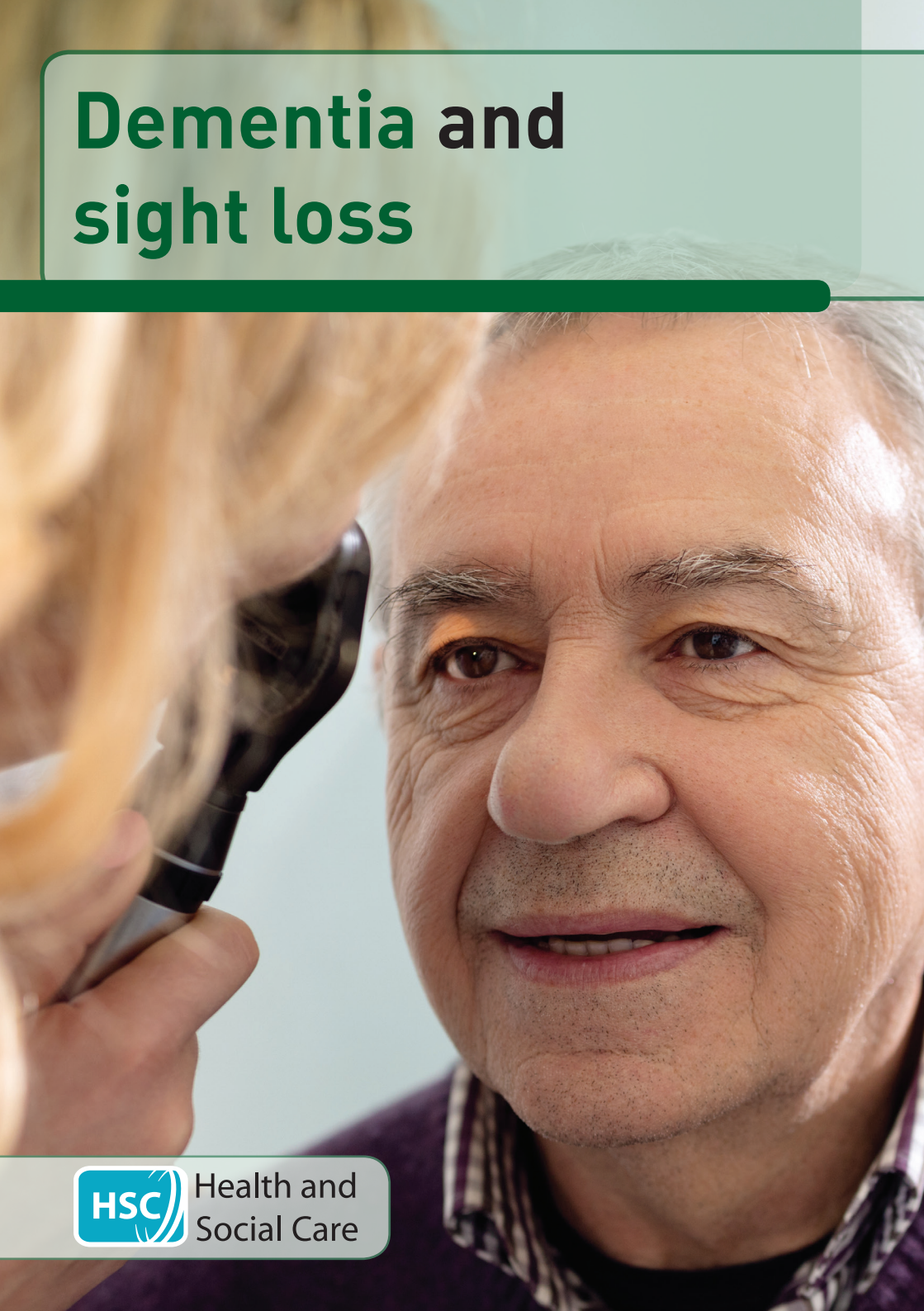
Dementia and sight loss



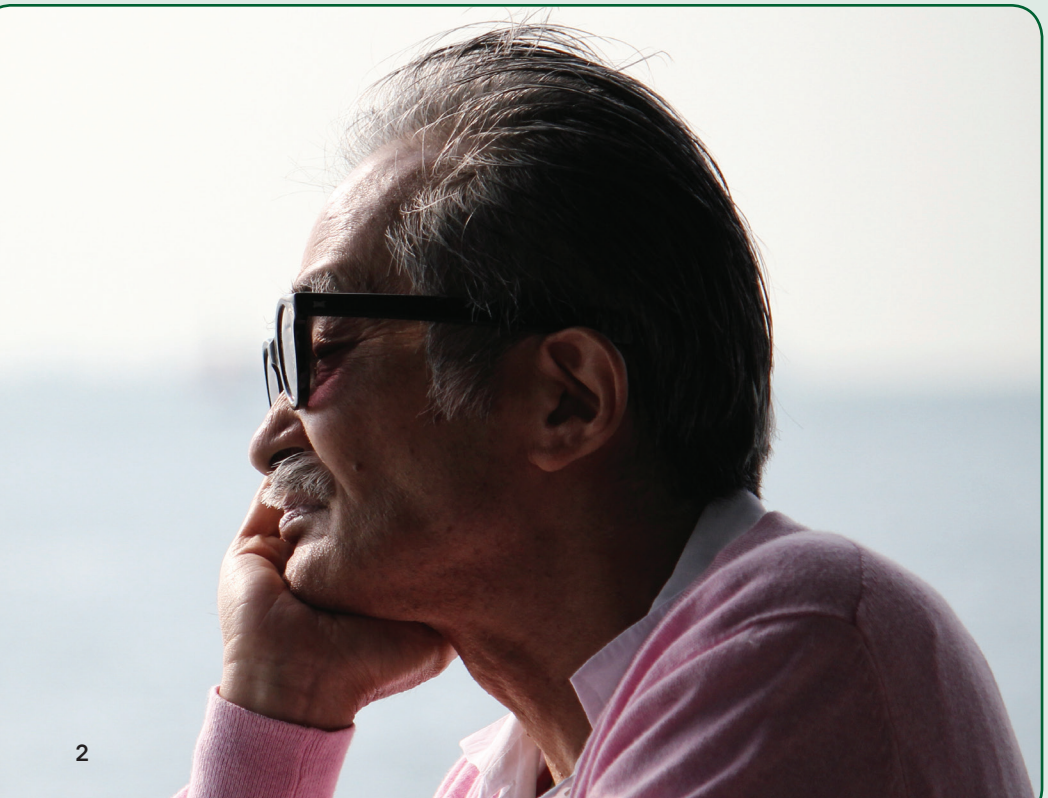
HSC Health and Social Care

Dementia and sight loss

This leaflet has useful information for anyone with a dementia. You may also find this leaflet helpful if you are caring for someone with a dementia.

As well as learning more about sight loss and dementia, you will find other information that will help you make the most of your sight.

If you have further questions after reading this leaflet, there are some useful contacts and links at the end of this leaflet.



How common is sight loss in people with a dementia?

Sight loss affects around 250,000 people with a dementia in the UK. It may be caused by:

- an eye condition, such as cataracts;
- another health condition, such as stroke;
- normal ageing of the eye;
- the dementia itself.

If you have a dementia, you may have visual difficulties but still have healthy eyes. These problems are caused by the effect of dementia on the brain.

Dementia conditions that may have an impact on vision are:

- Lewy body dementia;
- posterior cortical atrophy;
- Alzheimer's disease;
- vascular dementia.

If you want to find our more about dementia, visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/dementia

What are the signs?

If you have a dementia, consider if you are having difficulty with:

- reading;
- recognising people;
- coping with bright light, low light or both;
- finding things;
- avoiding obstacles;
- locating food on your plate;
- seeing well with your current glasses.

Sight loss is typically under-diagnosed in people with a dementia because one condition can mask or be mistaken for another.

A recent study into the prevalence of dementia and sight loss found nearly one-third of people with a dementia also had significant sight loss. Almost half of the study participants could have their sight loss corrected by wearing up-to-date spectacle prescriptions.

Sight loss or dementia?

You may find yourself behaving differently as a reaction to sight loss or while trying to make the most of your vision. Examples include:

- becoming withdrawn or uncommunicative;
- being clumsy or falling more;
- having visual hallucinations;
- holding things up close;
- feeling confused and disorientated;
- being startled by noises or people approaching.

Some of the above may be due to dementia, but sight loss could be a contributory factor.

Charles Bonnet Syndrome

Charles Bonnet Syndrome (CBS) is common among people who have lost their vision from an eye condition, such as age-related macular degeneration, cataract, glaucoma or diabetic eye disease.

CBS causes people to see things that aren't there. These visual hallucinations can be distressing, but usually last between a year and 18 months, after which they become a lot less frequent.

There is currently no medical cure for CBS and it is important to ensure that the hallucinations are not caused by a mental health problem, another disease or infection, or a particular type of dementia.

What should I do?

If you have a dementia, you should have your sight examined regularly. In Northern Ireland, the sight test is free for people over the age of 60. For a list of other criteria to help with payment of eye tests and who might be eligible for free eye tests see www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/free-sight-tests-over-60s-and-help-other-health-costs

Your local optometrist can give advice about eye health and ensure that the correct glasses are worn at the right time. Many will even come to your home or make arrangements to see you at a time most suited to you. For help to find an optometrist you can use the link http://servicefinder.hscni.net/ A list of approved domicilary providers who can provide home visits is available on the link http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/1836.htm

If you are the carer of a person with dementia, he or she may not be able to tell you about changes to their sight. It is therefore vital to ensure that the person has regular eye tests.

What could help?

- Follow the 'three Cs': make sure glasses are always current, clean and correct.

- Make sure glasses fit well.
- Ensure good, even lighting to help reduce shadows.
- Reduce the risk of trips and falls.
- Use good colour contrast, especially for everyday activities.
- Having plain backgrounds, for example for walls, can be more helpful than patterned.
- When guiding the person indoors, give information about the people who are present and the environment.
- Ensure any medication is taken, especially eye drops.

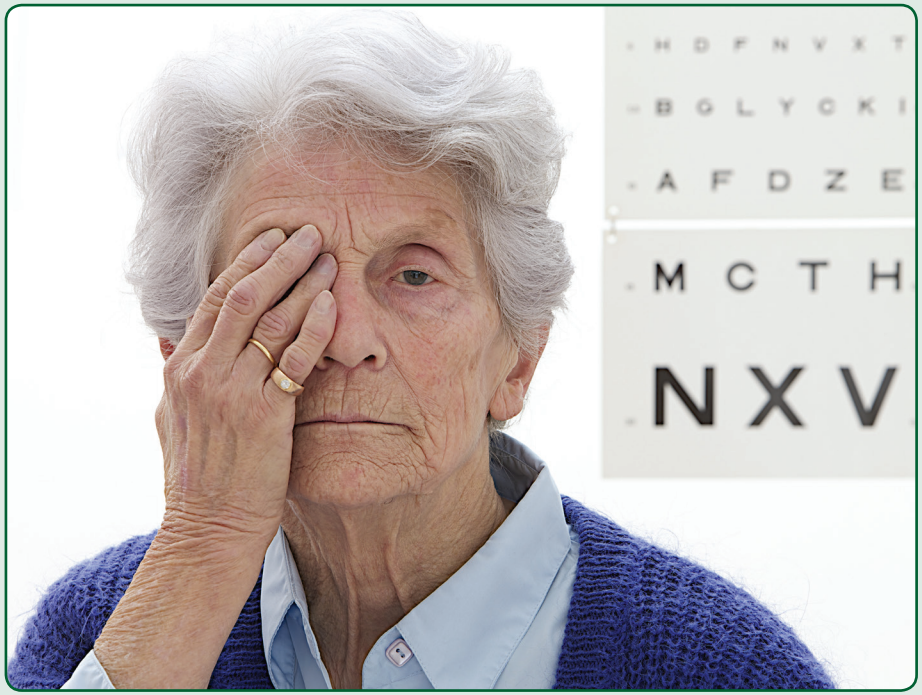
There is a list of useful contacts and links at the back of this leaflet of organsiations and professionals who can offer information and advice on good eye care.

You can also contact a dementia navigator through your local Health and Social Care Trust's memory service team. A dementia navigator is a vital link person if you are living with a dementia. Dementia navigators can be contacted through Health and Social Care Trusts (see page 11).

Their role is to provide information and support – this can be face to face or over the telephone. They will also provide vital signposting to other services to ensure you can live as full a life as possible with your dementia.

Handy hints for visiting the optometrist

- Let the optometrist know that you have dementia.
- Take a list of your medication.
- Take your glasses with you.
- If there is a family history of eye problems, tell the optometrist.



Useful contacts and links

RNIB Northern Ireland
Victoria House,
15 - 17 Gloucester St
Belfast BT1 4LS
Helpline 0303 123 9999
helpline@rnib.org.uk
www.rnib.org.uk/northern-ireland

Alzheimer's Society
Unit 4, Balmoral Business Park
Boucher Crescent
Belfast BT12 6HU
Helpline 0300 222 1122
www.alzheimers.org.uk

Dementia NI
54 Elmwood Avenue
Belfast
BT9 6AZ
Tel: 02890 68 67 68
Email: info@dementiani.org
www.dementiani.org

VISION 2020
www.vision2020.org.uk

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust
info@belfasttrust.hscni.net
www.belfasttrust.hscni.net

Northern Health and Social Care Trust
www.northerntrust.hscni.net

Southern Health and Social Care Trust
www.southerntrust.hscni.net

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust
www.setrust.hscni.net

Western Health and Social Care Trust
www.westerntrust.hscni.net

Acknowledgements

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Dementia Together NI

HSC Health and Social Care

Northern Ireland Executive
www.northernireland.gov.uk
DELIVERING SOCIAL CHANGE

RNIB
Supporting people with sight loss

Public Health Agency
12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

Find us on:

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