Having good eyesight is essential to safe driving. Yet some drivers fail to get their eyes tested regularly, some going years or even decades without checking their vision is up to scratch. Others put themselves and others in danger by driving without their glasses or lenses.

Brake’s sharpen up campaign, supported by RSA and Specsavers, calls on drivers to ensure their vision is at a safe standard for driving, and calls on the government to introduce compulsory eyesight tests for drivers.

As part of the campaign, Brake, RSA and Specsavers surveyed 1,000 UK drivers on their eyesight and their opinions on compulsory testing. The survey was conducted by Surveygoo.

**DRIVER EYESIGHT**

**RESEARCH SHOWS...**

Crash risk is heightened by poor vision, for obvious reasons: if you cannot see well, you may not see a hazard or person in time to stop, or you may not be able to respond to the environment around you at all.

Road crashes caused by poor driver vision are estimated to cause 2,900 casualties and cost £33 million in the UK per year.

Vision problems are very common – almost three quarters (74%) of people in the UK either wear glasses or contact lenses, or have had laser eye surgery to correct their vision. Long- or short-sightedness is the most common, and can affect anyone at any age.

Several health conditions, including age-related macular degeneration, cataract and glaucoma, can cause serious and sometimes permanent damage to eyesight. These conditions are more common in people aged over 50, but can affect younger people too.
Driver eyesight survey

Q1: If you require glasses or lenses for driving, do you always wear them while driving?

Of the 66% of drivers who say they need glasses or lenses for driving, a worrying one in eight (12%) admit driving without them in the past 12 months.

Of the 54% who say they don’t need glasses or lenses for driving, one in three (33%) hasn’t had an eye test in the past two years, so cannot be sure that they are safe to drive without corrective lenses.

- 36% don’t need glasses or lenses for driving, and have had an eye test in the past two years
- 18% don’t need glasses or lenses for driving, but haven’t had an eyesight test in the past two years
- 41% need glasses or lenses for driving, and always wear them
- 3% need glasses or lenses for driving, but have driven without them once or twice in the past 12 months
- 2% need glasses or lenses for driving, but have driven without them numerous times in the past 12 months

BRAKE’S ADVICE

If you need glasses or lenses you must always wear them when driving, even on short journeys. Keep a spare pair of glasses in your vehicle if you’re prone to forget them.

Natalie’s story

Natalie Wade, 28, from Rochford, Essex, was killed by a partially sighted driver in February 2006. She was knocked down on a pedestrian crossing, along with her mother, Christine Gutberlet, by 78 year old John Thorpe. Christine survived, but Natalie suffered severe brain damage from which she died in intensive care on Valentine’s Day. The bride-to-be was shopping for her wedding dress when she was hit.

Driver John Thorpe was blind in one eye and had 40 defects in the other, but had not declared his sight problems to the DVLA. He died of natural causes before his trial could be completed. The inquest returned a verdict of unlawful killing.

Natalie’s family have been campaigning for changes in the law to prevent similar tragedies. Natalie’s aunt, Revd Brenda Gutberlet, says: “Natalie was a wonderful, bubbly young woman, full of life and laughter. She was lovely to be around. The years since her death have been a rollercoaster, for Natalie’s parents and for all her family and friends. It’s hard to put into words what it has been like.

“Natalie’s death, like so many on our roads, was completely avoidable. The question every driver should ask before they get behind the wheel is: am I fit to drive today? But not everyone is honest with themselves. To get behind the wheel of a vehicle unable to see shows a disregard for the lives of others, and it can’t be right that we still allow drivers to do so.”

Q2: When did you last have an eyesight test by an optician?

One in four (25%) drivers hasn’t had a vision test in the past two years. One in eight (12%) admit not visiting the optician for five years or more, and 4% (the equivalent to more than 1.5 million UK drivers) have never had their eyes tested. This means a huge proportion of drivers can’t be sure their eyesight is up to scratch.

- 50% said in the last year
- 24% said between one and two years ago
- 8% said between two and three years ago
- 5% said between three and five years ago
- 5% said between five and 10 years ago
- 3% said more than 10 years ago
- 4% have never had their eyes tested

Q3: How regularly do you usually get your eyesight tested by an optician?

Two in three (66%) drivers visit an optician at least every two years, in accordance with expert advice. However, almost one in five (18%) say they never go or hardly ever, or only go when they notice a problem. This is worrying as eyesight can deteriorate severely before you notice a problem.

- 26% said once a year at least
- 40% said every two years
- 14% said every three to five years
- 2% said every five to 10 years
- 6% said only if they notice a problem
- 12% said never or hardly ever

EYESIGHT TESTING

RESEARCH SHOWS...

Changes in eyesight can be gradual, and it is possible to lose up to 40% of your vision before noticing it: Hence experts recommend having a professional eye test at least every two years to ensure good eyesight for safe driving.

A professional eye test not only checks vision over distance, but can also check for defects such as problems seeing things in your central or peripheral vision, known as visual field defects. Visual field defects can be caused by illnesses such as glaucoma, retinal disease or cataract.

Drivers with visual field defects have double the incidence of road crashes and traffic violations compared to drivers with a full visual field, and almost half of people with visual field loss are unaware of the problem.

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Q4: Have you ever noticed problems with your vision but put off visiting the opticians?

An alarming one in five (19%) drivers have put off visiting an optician when noticing problems with their vision, for a variety of reasons, putting themselves and others in real danger when they get behind the wheel.

- 8% said yes, because they were worried about the cost of an eye exam, glasses or contact lenses
- 6% said yes, because they were busy
- 3% said yes, because they were worried they would find something seriously wrong
- 3% said yes, because of other reasons
- 2% said yes, because they were worried it would mean they couldn’t continue driving
- 81% said they’d always immediately booked an eye test when noticing vision problems, or they’d never noticed problems with their vision

**BRAKE’S ADVICE**

If you drive, regular visits to the opticians are essential to ensure your eyesight meets legal standards, and you’re not putting yourself and others at great risk. It also helps to catch early signs of eye disease so they can be treated before they become a major problem.

You should get your eyes checked by an optician at least every two years, or straight away if you notice any problems. Do not be tempted to put off visiting the opticians – most vision problems are easily corrected, and the sooner you know the problem, the sooner it can be fixed. Regular eye tests can also help identify other health conditions, such as high blood pressure.

Going to the optician needn’t be expensive and may be free – eye sight tests are free in the UK if you are under 16, over 60, claiming certain benefits, or if you have certain medical conditions. See the NHS website to find out if you qualify. Eye tests are free for all UK residents in Scotland. If you are not entitled to free tests, many high street opticians run promotions offering free or cheap tests.

If you regularly use computer screens for significant periods at work, you are entitled to ask your employer to pay for your eye tests, under the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992. If you drive for work, your employer may also have made arrangements for free or discounted eye tests.

**Cassie’s story**

Cassie McCord was just 16 when she was knocked down and killed by a driver with defective eyesight. Colin Horsfall, 87, had been stopped three days earlier and police found he was unable to read a number plate at 20 metres. They asked if he would surrender his licence, but were unable to persuade him.

Cassie, who wanted to become a lawyer, was hit on the pavement as she walked to college in February 2011. She died from severe head injuries the next day. Horsfall died from his injuries three months later.

Since Cassie’s death, her mum Jackie McCord has campaigned for Cassie’s Law, to help police get drivers with defective eyesight off roads quicker. This resulted in a new procedure making it faster for police to report potential problems with driver eyesight.

Jackie is also supporting Brake’s sharpen up campaign, calling for drivers to get their eyesight tested every two years, and urging all drivers who need to wear glasses or lenses to do so at all times when driving.

**EYESIGHT REGULATIONS**

**UK REGULATIONS**

In the UK, drivers must be able to read a modern car number plate (made after 1 September 2001) from 20 metres away. This does not test for visual field and contrast sensitivity, both of which are important to safe driving.

The number plate test is only carried out when someone takes their driving test, plus it may be conducted by police at the roadside if they suspect an eyesight problem. So following their driving test, a driver may never need to produce any further evidence that they can see well enough to drive. Drivers aged over 70 have to declare when renewing their licence that their eyesight meets minimum legal standards, but do not have to provide evidence of this.

It is estimated up to five million UK drivers would fail a number plate test if they had to take it again. 5,916 drivers had their licence revoked for failing to meet minimum eyesight standards in 2011.

Drivers have to inform the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) if their vision (with glasses or lenses if needed) is below 6/12 (0.5) on the Snellen scale, or their horizontal visual field is less than 120°. Certain medical conditions, such as glaucoma or cataracts, also need to be reported to the DVLA, who will conduct an assessment to determine if the driver is safe. Full details of medical conditions that must be reported are at www.gov.uk/health-conditions-and-driving.

Lorry and bus drivers have to meet higher vision standards than other drivers. They must have vision of at least 6/7.5 (0.8) in their best eye and at least 6/60 (0.1) in the other eye, with glasses with Continued>
Q5: How often do you check your vision using the number plate test?
Almost half (49%) of drivers check their distance vision using the number plate test at least once every two years. However, one in four has not used this method since passing their driving test.

- 22% do this at least every six months
- 17% do this annually
- 10% do this every two years
- 24% do not do this regularly, but have done it at least once since passing their driving test
- 26% have not done the number plate test since passing their driving test

Q6: Do you think driving test candidates should have to provide proof of a recent, full eyesight test by an optician, which accurately assesses distance and peripheral vision and checks for other vision problems?
Two thirds (67%) agree that driving test candidates should be required to produce evidence of recent, comprehensive sight tests when taking their driving test.

- 67% said yes
- 33% said no

Q7: Should drivers have to provide their vision meets minimum legal standards for safe driving by providing evidence of a recent sight test when they renew their driving licence or licence photocard?
Nearly nine in ten (87%) agree that drivers should be required to produce evidence of recent sight tests when renewing licences.

- 87% said yes
- 13% said no

Q8: Do you think opticians and GPs should be obliged to let patients know if their vision or health conditions mean they are falling below legal requirements for safe driving?
The vast majority (94%) believe GPs and opticians should be obliged to inform patients if their vision or health conditions could be putting them at risk when driving.

- 94% said yes
- 6% said no

Q9: Do you think opticians and GPs should be obliged to inform the DVLA if one of their patients who drives has a vision or health condition that means they fall below minimum legal standards for safe driving?
More than three quarters (76%) think opticians and GPs should be obliged to inform the DVLA if the vision of a patient who drives falls below the minimum legal standard due to a vision or health condition.

- 76% said yes
- 24% said no

BRAKE’S ADVICE
If your optician or GP mentions any problems with your vision, or health conditions that could affect your vision, let them know if you drive and ask if your vision is at risk of falling below the minimum safe standards for driving.
Visit www.gov.uk/health-conditions-and-driving to find out what must be reported and ask your GP or optician if unsure.

The number plate test is a simple, quick way to check if your distance vision meets legal standards. However, this test will not identify other vision problems such as visual field defects, so full, professional eye tests at least every two years are still essential.

BRAKE’S CALLS FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION
Brake calls on the government to introduce a requirement for drivers to provide proof of a recent, professional eye test when applying for their provisional licence, to ensure all new drivers meet appropriate standards.

Brake is also campaigning for compulsory regular eye tests for drivers throughout their driving career. Brake proposes that drivers should have to produce evidence of a recent eye test when renewing their licence photocard every 10 years. It’s been estimated this would save the public purse at least £6.7 million a year by preventing crashes.*

The government should also raise awareness among drivers about the importance and benefits of getting eyes tested at least every two years or straight away if you notice a problem. This could include reminders in communications from the DVLA, such as tax disc renewal letters.

End notes
1. Detailed cost-benefit analysis of potential impairment countermeasures: research in the framework of the European research programme IMMORTAL, SWOV Institute for Road Safety Research, 2005
2. Fit to Drive: a cost-benefit analysis of more frequent eyesight testing for UK drivers, RSA Insurance Group plc, 2012
3. Britain’s eye health in 2011, College of Optometrists, 2013
7. Incidence of visual field loss in 20,000 eyes and its relationship to driving performance, Archives of Ophthalmology, 1983
8. Driving licence data, DVLA, March 2014
9. Driving eye tests, DVLA, 2011
11. Question to Parliament, Meg Munn MP, 13 December 2012
12. Driving eye tests, DVLA, 2014
13. Driving eye tests, DVLA, 2014
14. Fit to Drive: a cost-benefit analysis of more frequent eyesight testing for UK drivers, RSA Insurance Group plc, 2012