FIT TO DRIVE

Few of us would ever consider driving without wearing a seat belt or ensuring our car was regularly serviced. Yet every year, millions of drivers take to the wheel with poor eyesight.

It is estimated that 100 adults a day start losing their sight, half of which could be prevented by regular eye tests and early treatment.

We know from research we’ve carried out that eyesight can have a dramatic effect on driving performance and therefore road safety. Drivers with poor eyesight struggle to stay in lane, read road signs or keep a consistent speed. They also experience a greater mental workload, which may be manageable over a short period of time, but on longer journeys could heighten the chance of fatigue and therefore increase accident risk.

The impact of this on our busy streets and motorways could literally be lethal.

As one of the country’s leading motor insurers we want to see our roads become safer and the dangers of ‘driving blind’ better understood.

Eyesight is a crucial aspect of driving safety yet we know that drivers are not looking after their eyes and having regular eye tests. A fifth (21%) of drivers that we surveyed have struggled to read road signs, and when the findings were applied to the total driving population, over five and a half million¹ people with glasses or contact lenses admitted to having driven without them.

So the question we’re asking the nation is: Are you really ‘Fit to Drive’?

Eye tests are essential to ensure good vision and can also pick up early signs of a number of other health issues. The NHS recommends regular eye tests, typically every two years, but we know that a fifth (20%) of drivers haven’t had a test in the last two years.

Having a routine eye examination should be something you automatically get done as part of a good health regime, like regular dental checks. At RSA we want to see good habits established early with all learner drivers required to have their vision tested by a qualified professional prior to applying for a provisional driving licence and then mandatory eye tests every ten years, linked to the driving licence renewal cycle.

Only when people start taking the care of their eyesight as seriously as the safety of their cars will we stop people ‘driving blind’.

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¹ Source: RSA research

Adrian Brown
RSA UK Chief Executive
Fit to Drive Campaign

As part of our Rethinking Risk Thought Leadership programme we are launching a campaign to find out if our nation’s drivers really are ‘Fit to Drive’.

As an insurer of around two million vehicles, RSA has a keen interest in reducing the terrible human and financial toll of accidents on our roads.

Every year there are around 700,000 casualties in accidents on UK roads caused by a range of factors, not least poor eyesight.

Eyesight is a key factor in road safety but one that is often ignored. How often have you squinted to read a road sign or asked your partner to read it for you?

A driver’s eyesight is only checked when they take their driving test and then nothing is done until they reach 70. But we know that eyesight changes and deteriorates over time. Unless you have your eyes regularly checked by a qualified optician you may not know that you need glasses or lenses until it’s too late.

The biggest risk about eyesight and driving is that it’s something of an unknown quantity. The truth is no-one really knows for certain how many people are ‘driving blind’.

But just how dangerous is driving with poor eyesight?

There is no doubt that driving with poor eyesight is potentially lethal. Every year it contributes to a significant number of deaths and serious injuries on our roads.

Previous research into the impact of eyesight on driving and risk leaves a number of unanswered questions, and this is why we commissioned Brunel University to carry out an in-depth study to prove the effects of vision on driving safety and performance.

A panel of people with 20:20 vision (6/6 in the metric system) were put through a thorough test in Brunel’s driving simulator. Each person was presented with a range of tasks and hazards over a seven mile route and various aspects of their driving performance recorded.

Participants undertook the study three times, once with their normal eyesight and then again with two levels of blur: ‘weak’ (the current legal minimum for driving) and ‘strong’ (slightly worse than the legal minimum for driving).

What were the findings?

The study found that visual acuity, i.e. sharpness of vision, had a fundamental impact on a driver’s performance. Specifically:

1. When a driver’s vision was blurred they struggled to stay in lane, keep a consistent speed or read road signs. For example, at the legal minimum level to drive people strayed out of lane 62% more often than with normal vision and could only recognise three-quarters (77%) of the road signs they passed compared to normal vision.

2. Visual acuity also has a significant impact on a driver’s mental workload. While this may be manageable over a short period of time, on longer journeys it could heighten the chance of fatigue and therefore increase accident risk.

3. The study concluded that the current number plate test is not fit for purpose. It is not a sensitive method of measuring whether a driver’s eyesight meets the minimum standard laid down by law. In addition, as visual acuity is only part of the relationship between eyesight and accident risk, other aspects such as visual field should also be taken into account when assessing a driver’s vision.

Taken together, it is obvious that the current regime for testing drivers’ eyesight is woefully inadequate. If you get behind the wheel of a car with poor eyesight you are clearly not ‘Fit to Drive’. To combat this problem we need a more comprehensive assessment of a driver’s vision before they are given a provisional licence and we need to ensure that people are having regular eye examinations over their driving career because eyesight changes over time.
To find out what people think about driving and eyesight we polled a number of drivers. Almost all of those surveyed (92%) believe that people who drive with poor eyesight are a danger to themselves and other road users. But, over one in five (21%) have struggled to read road signs and a similar number (20%) haven’t had their eyes tested in the last two years.

And when we asked them what should be done to address the number of drivers on the road with poor eyesight, they were equally clear. Three-quarters (75%) agree that eye tests should be mandatory when renewing a driving licence. Furthermore, almost eight out of 10 (77%) would support legislation to increase provisions for eyesight testing when people take a driving test.

It’s clear, therefore, that the academic evidence proves that poor eyesight has a significant impact on driving performance and there is strong support from drivers for action to tackle this.

However, any changes to the driving test or licence renewal process will require political backing. We surveyed a number of MPs to find out their views on these issues.

Echoing the findings of the research among drivers, an overwhelming majority (89%) of MPs believe that people who drive with poor vision pose a significant danger to themselves and other road users.

There is also strong support for change. Six out of 10 MPs (57%) agree that an eye test should be mandatory when renewing a driving licence. In addition, just over half of those surveyed (51%) would support legislation to increase provision for eyesight checking when people take a driving test.

As well as drivers and MPs, we’ve also spoken to a wide range of organisations with an interest in road safety or eyesight and the support for this campaign is widespread.

Esther McVey, Member of Parliament for Wirral West said: “Poor eyesight is the hidden danger on our roads and today’s report should act as a massive wake-up call to all of us.

“Great strides have been made in improving road safety but we should now question whether it’s right that drivers can simply read a number plate aged 17 and carry on driving for the next 50 years without realising that they might need an eye test.

“I fully support RSA in raising this important issue and welcome the opportunity to increase awareness and develop solutions to prevent drivers with poor eyesight becoming a greater risk on our roads.”

Dr Mark Porter commented: “The message couldn’t be clearer - have your eyes checked regularly. And if you do need to wear glasses or contact lenses to pass the number plate test then please wear them when you are driving – failing to do so should, in my opinion, be an offence that is treated with the same gravity as drinking and driving. It is just as stupid, and probably as dangerous.

“But road safety isn’t the only thing likely to benefit from more regular eye tests. Your eyes provide a unique insight into the inner workings of the body, and a skilled optometrist can often pick up early tell-tale signs of silent but potentially devastating illnesses. From raised pressure in the eye ball (glaucoma) and retinal damage, to a range of problems originating in other parts of the body including diabetes, dangerous cholesterol levels, high blood pressure and even brain tumours.”

Katie Shepherd, director of fundraising at Brake, said: “As a charity that supports families devastated by road deaths and injuries, we recognise how vital it is to ensure all drivers have good eyesight. Being able to see clearly what’s in front and around you is fundamental to safe, responsible driving. To make our roads safer we need a scientific eyesight test carried out at the start of your driving career and regularly throughout it.”
Are you ‘Fit to Drive’? It’s too important to be left to chance

The financial cost of dealing with accidents is huge and reducing this burden can only be a good thing, particularly when the economic recovery is still fragile.

According to the Department for Transport, every death on the road costs £1.6 million and the total value of prevention of all reported accidents is £15.8 billion. There are not only the medical costs associated with ambulance, paramedic and hospital costs to consider but also the knock on costs to the economy as a whole through loss of output as injured people are unable to work. Even relatively minor accidents have a considerable financial impact when added together. For example, the insurance industry pays out nearly £2 billion a year on whiplash claims alone.

But it’s not just about safety and saving money. More thorough, more frequent eye tests would also have broader health benefits.

An eye test can pick up the early signs of many illnesses and disease. The NHS spends over £4.35 billion a year treating diabetes, glaucoma and blood pressure alone. Early detection of just 10% of these conditions could save the NHS £435 million as well as untold pain and misery for thousands of families.

Putting our money where our mouth is

At RSA we are determined to do our bit.
- Through our partnership with Specsavers we provide:
  - eye health screening plus vouchers for free eye examinations and discounted glasses for our employees; and
  - eye care services to the managers of business fleets we insure.
- In addition, for customers of MORE TH>N (our direct business) we provide discounted glasses, contact lenses and laser surgery as well as free eye examinations.

But we won’t solve the problem on our own. The time for action is now

There have been many successful road safety campaigns over the years on important road safety issues such as drink driving, the dangers of using a mobile phone and the wearing of seatbelts. People driving with poor eyesight are an unseen danger on our roads and it is time for a similar campaign to highlight and address this.

The solution is simple, but the benefits are considerable.

RSA is calling for:
- The current wholly inadequate number plate test to be scrapped;
- Instead, all learner drivers to have their vision tested by a qualified professional prior to applying for a provisional driving licence; and
- Eye tests to be mandatory every ten years, linked to driving licence renewal.

By adopting these simple measures we will take another important step to tackling the epidemic of people killed and injured unnecessarily on our roads every year.

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2021 adults, of which 1676 drive. Fieldwork was undertaken between 21st – 23rd March 2011. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+)

ComRes polled a representative sample of 154 MPs between 09 March – 04 April 2011

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