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Embargoed until 00:01hrs Thursday 21 August 2014

Charity urges government to make driver eyesight tests compulsory

Survey shows overwhelming public support

Brake, the road safety charity, is calling on the government to introduce compulsory regular eyesight testing for drivers, as a [survey](#) with Specsavers **Corporate Eyecare** and RSA Insurance Group shows strong public support. Almost nine in 10 (87%) are in favour of drivers having to prove they have had a recent sight test every 10 years, when they renew their licence or photo card. Research indicates this change in the law would significantly reduce the estimated 2,900 casualties caused by poor driver vision each year [1].

The [survey](#) shows why government action is needed, with **a quarter (25%) of drivers admitting they have not had their eyes tested in more than two years** – despite research showing you can lose up to 40% of your vision before noticing the difference [2].

Many drivers are also failing to respond to warning signs in regards to their vision: one in five (19%) have put off visiting the optician when they noticed a problem. In addition, a shocking **one in eight drivers (12%) who know they need glasses or lenses to drive have done so without them in the past year.**

Brake, Specsavers and RSA's [survey of drivers](#) also found: *(full results below)*

- More than 1.5 million UK drivers (4%) have never had their eyes tested;
- One in eight (12%) have not had their eyes tested for more than five years; and
- Of the 54% of UK drivers who believe they don't need glasses or lenses to drive, one third (33%) have no way of knowing this for sure, having not had an eyesight test in over two years.

The only measure currently in place to ensure driver vision satisfies minimum legal standards is the number-plate test carried out from 20 metres away before driving tests, and occasionally at the roadside if police suspect an eyesight problem. This does not test visual field or contrast sensitivity, both of which are important to safe driving, nor is it a totally accurate measure of visual acuity (vision over distance).

Following their driving test, a driver may never need to produce any further evidence that they can see well enough to drive. It is estimated up to five million UK drivers would fail a number-plate test if they had to take it again [3].

Brake is urging the government to introduce a requirement for drivers to prove a recent, professional eye test when applying for a provisional licence, and at least every 10 years thereafter. It's estimated this would save the public purse at least £6.7 million a year by preventing crashes [4].

Brake urges all drivers to make sure their vision is up to scratch by having a professional sight test at least every two years, following expert advice, and always wearing glasses or lenses if they need them. See *Brake's advice below.*

Julie Townsend, deputy chief executive, Brake, said: "Compulsory regular eyesight testing for drivers is a common sense, lifesaving move. Clearly the public agrees that the government needs to act to tackle the alarming number of drivers taking a lax approach to their eyes. Making sure your vision is up to scratch is crucial to safe driving, and though it may seem there are plenty of excuses to put off going to the opticians, none is good enough when it comes to putting people's lives at risk. If you drive, it's not just your own health you are jeopardising by neglecting your eyesight, but the lives of those around you. That's why it's

vital for drivers to get their eyes professionally checked at least every two years – eyesight can deteriorate rapidly without you noticing.”

Mark Christer, managing director of Personal Insurance at RSA, said: “We want far more rigorous checks that drivers’ eyesight meets the minimum standards. The UK’s ‘number-plate test’ is a relic of the 1930s and it’s no wonder so many other EU countries have introduced more modern testing. It is time we did too.

“Put simply, if you’re not sure whether you are fit to drive, you could be seriously endangering yourself and other road users. The limitations of our current system mean many people could be doing just that without even knowing it.”

Suzanne Randall, corporate account manager for Specsavers Corporate Eyecare, said: “The stats are quite alarming, it’s important that we all recognise the importance of regular eye examinations and the role that they play in keeping both drivers and pedestrians safe on the roads. Currently eye sight is only tested once, on the day of the driving test. It is then the driver’s responsibility to check whether their vision remains above the legal standard. Because eyesight deteriorates gradually over time, the only way to be 100% certain that they remain both legal and safe is to have regular eye examinations. Many employers are getting behind this message and ensuring the eyesight of their staff is good enough for driving, and these findings show this has support.”

Read about Brake’s [Sharpen up campaign](#). Tweet us: [@Brakecharity](#), hashtag #SharpenUp. Read the [survey report](#).

Case study

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 has been campaigning for changes in the law to prevent similar tragedies. **Natalie’s aunt, Revd Brenda Gutberlet, said:** “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.”

Brenda’s MP, Rebecca Harris, is supporting the family’s campaign. Responding to the report, she said: “These survey results are genuinely shocking. It’s clear public awareness of how important this issue is remains frighteningly low. We need drivers to see getting behind the wheel without regular eye tests or without wearing the prescription lenses they need as being as irresponsible as drink-driving.”

Facts

Poor vision heightens crash risk [4], causing an estimated 2,900 road casualties at a cost of £33 million in the UK every year [5].

Vision problems are very common – 74% of people in the UK wear glasses or contact lenses, or have had laser eye surgery [6]. Long- or short-sightedness is the most common [7], but several health conditions, including age-related macular degeneration, cataract and glaucoma, can also cause serious damage to eyesight. These conditions are more common in people aged over 50, but can affect younger people too. Changes in eyesight can be gradual, and it is possible to lose up to 40% of your vision before noticing it [8].

Vision can be affected by a number of defects only identifiable by a professional eye examination. These include problems seeing things in your central or peripheral vision, known as visual field defects, which 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 as drivers with a full visual field, and almost half are unaware of the problem [9].

At present, drivers in the UK are required to read a modern car number plate (made after 1 September 2001) from 20 metres away [10]. However, 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. This means that 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 numberplate test if they had to take it again [11].

Some countries already have more stringent systems in place to regulate driver eyesight. In the US, a number of states, such as California, issue restricted licences indicating that the driver is required to wear glasses or lenses to drive, if the vision examination shows this to be the case. If they are then stopped by the police and are not wearing glasses or lenses, they can be immediately penalised [12].

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 risk. You should get your eyes checked by an optician at least every two years or straight away if you notice any problems. Don't be tempted to put it off – most vision problems are easily corrected, and the sooner you know the problem, the sooner it can be fixed.

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 have certain medical conditions. Check the [NHS website](#) to see if you qualify. Many high street opticians also run promotions offering free or cheap tests. If you regularly use computer screens at work, you are entitled to ask your employer to pay for your eye tests.

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

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.

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 [13].

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.

About the report

The survey results, released today (Thursday 21 August 2014) consisted of 1,000 drivers and was conducted by Surveygoo. [Read the report.](#)

Full results

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

- 36% don't need glasses or lenses for driving, and have had an eyesight 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

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

- 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?

- 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

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

- 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

Q5: How often do you check your vision using the number plate 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?

- 67% said yes
- 33% said no

Q7: Should drivers have to prove 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?

- 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?

- 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?

- 76% said yes
- 24% said no

Brake

[Brake](#) is a national road safety charity that exists to stop the needless deaths and serious injuries that happen on roads every day, make streets and communities safer for everyone, and care for families bereaved and injured in road crashes. Brake promotes road safety awareness, safe and sustainable road use, and effective road safety policies. We do this through national [campaigns](#), [community education](#), [services](#) for road safety professionals and employers, and by coordinating the UK's flagship road safety event every November, [Road Safety Week](#). Brake is a national, government-funded provider of [support](#) to families and individuals devastated by road death and serious injury, including through a helpline and support packs.

Brake was founded in the UK in 1995, and now has domestic operations in the UK and [New Zealand](#), and works globally to promote action on road safety.

Road crashes are not accidents; they are devastating and preventable events, not chance mishaps. Calling them accidents undermines work to make roads safer, and can cause insult to families whose lives have been torn apart by needless casualties.

RSA

With a 300-year heritage, RSA is one of the world's leading multinational quoted insurance groups. RSA has major operations in the UK & Western Europe, Scandinavia, Canada and Latin America and can write business in around 140 countries in total. Focusing on general insurance such as motor, home, pet and commercial cover, RSA has more than 21,000 employees serving 17 million customers worldwide. In 2013 its net written premiums were £8.7 billion.

Since 2011, RSA's 'Fit to Drive' campaign has worked to highlight the important issue of eye health and driver safety in the UK. <http://www.rsagroup.com/>

Specsavers

[Specsavers](#) is a partnership of almost 2,000 locally-run businesses throughout the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Spain, Australia and New Zealand, all committed to delivering high quality, affordable optical and hearing care in the communities they serve. Each store is part-owned and managed by its own joint venture partners who are supported by key specialists in support offices that provide a range of services including marketing, accounting, recruitment, IT and wholesaling, among others. More than 28 million customers used Specsavers in 2013 and the partnership had a turnover of £1.8 billion.

End notes

[1] Fit to drive: a cost benefit analysis of more frequent eyesight testing for UK drivers, RSA Insurance Group plc, 2012

[2] World Glaucoma Day, International Glaucoma Association and Royal National Institute for the Blind, 2009

[3] "Millions of motorists are driving blind", Daily Mail, 2011. Available at:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-144678/Millions-motorists-driving-blind.html>

[4] 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

[5] Fit to Drive: a cost benefit analysis of more frequent eyesight testing for UK drivers, RSA Insurance Group plc, 2012

[6] Britain's eye health in focus, College of Optometrists, 2013

[7] SixthSense Opticians Survey, YouGov, 2011

[8] World Glaucoma Day, International Glaucoma Association and Royal National Institute for the Blind, 2009

[9] Incidence of visual field loss in 20,000 eyes and its relationship to driving performance, Archives of Ophthalmology, 1983

[10] Driving eyesight rules, DVLA, 2014

[11] "Millions of motorists are driving blind", Daily Mail, 2011. Available at:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-144678/Millions-motorists-driving-blind.html>

[12] International vision requirements for driver licensing and disability pensions: using a milestone approach in characterization of progressive eye disease, Alain Bron et al, 2010

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2999549/>

[13] Fit to drive: a cost benefit analysis of more frequent eyesight testing for UK drivers, RSA Insurance Group plc, 2012