

University of Missouri Extension

GG12, Reviewed October 1993

Aids to Independent Living for the Blind

C. Edwin Vaughan
Center for the Study of Aging

People who have experienced vision loss know how important it is to maintain the ability to do things for themselves. Most people become frustrated when they are unable to manage routine things that have been a part of their life-long habits. People with a vision loss usually are pleasantly surprised at how many aids, appliances and techniques are available to help them handle most aspects of everyday life in a new way — often with little help from other people.

In this guide you will find a description of many products available to help you do things for yourself. Also, there are do-it-yourself suggestions that will help make the activities of daily living more manageable. The aids discussed in this guide are grouped as follows:

- Household aids
- Writing paper and devices
- Travel aids
- Medical aids
- Low vision reading and distance aids
- Reading materials
- Games
- Sports equipment.

At the end of the guide is information about products on the market to meet the special needs of the person who is both deaf and blind.

This guide does not endorse any particular product or vendor. It is intended to help you and your friends become aware of these aids and appliances and where they can be obtained so you can make your own judgment concerning which might be of use to you.

Household aids

Sewing aids

If you have enjoyed sewing in the past and wish to continue this activity, there are only a few aids you will need. One essential item is a needle threader, which is very easily purchased. The simplest kind to use is a wire loop mounted on a metal handle. The loop is placed through the eye of the needle, the thread is run through the needle threader loop and the threader and thread are pulled together through the needle's eye. However, self-threading needles are preferred by some blind seamstresses. These are available in fabric shops as well as through agencies for the blind, such as the American Foundation for the Blind and Independent Living Aids.

Tape measures need to be slightly modified so that you can feel the intervals with your fingers. The measuring tape can be easily marked by stapling it along the 1-inch markings or by machine sewing at regular intervals. Patterns need to be trimmed by someone who can see the edge of the actual pattern. You may prefer to have patterns re-cut from a more durable paper than the tissue on which they are originally printed. The arrows on patterns can be marked with tape.

A helpful aid for your machine sewing is a seam gauge. It can be attached to the sewing machine to provide a guide for

sewing a straight line at a set distance from the edge of the fabric. A seam gauge is often included with the machine attachments. If it is not, one can be obtained through a machine manufacturer or outlet.

Cooking aids

There are many commercially available cooking aids that make it easier for a blind person to cook safely. Among these are extra long oven mitts, long-handled pancake turners, spatter screens, bacon crispers and apothecary jars for easy identification and use of spices. Specialty aids are available from the American Foundation for the Blind, Independent Living Aids and Aids Unlimited. Some people also find these items useful: the oven pusher-puller, which helps give easy access to hot pans on oven shelves; the gas stove lighter; the flame tamer; and devices which assist in cutting cakes and pies in straight, equal portions.

Appliances with tactile markings

Some appliances come with modified panels or braille markings, such as Sunbeam's braille electric skillet or Sharp's brailled microwave oven. Sears makes braille overlays for certain models of microwaves and also carries appliances such as washers and dryers that have brailled dials and panels. While other appliances can be readily marked to serve the needs of the blind operator, many appliances such as blenders and mixers require no modification.

Labeling

The easiest kind of labeling can be done by blind people who know braille. Dymo tape and dymo-tape brailers are available from the National Federation of the Blind, the American Foundation for the Blind and Independent Living Aids. These brailers write on 1/2-inch dymo tape, which can be purchased in most office supply stores. Often people simply braille onto a piece of plastic or paper and tape it or glue it onto a surface.

Permalabel is a piece of plastic with a band that can be fastened around jars or boxes. It is especially nice for labeling freezer goods. These reusable tags, which you braille for yourself, are available from Aids Unlimited. To help organize a closet, Chic labels (from Aids Unlimited) can be hung on the hanger, or Say-What labels (from Kentucky Industries for the Blind) can be used on the clothing to identify each item. The American Foundation for the Blind also sells metal tags which can be sewn onto clothing.

If you do not know braille, the Fisburn Alphabet can be used for labeling. It is a system of dots and lines designed for use by people unable to read braille because of touch difficulties.

Dials can be labeled with Hi-Marks Dots, which are available from Kentucky Industries for the Blind and from the American Foundation for the Blind. There are also 3-dimensional magnetic labels in the shape of fruits and vegetables which can be attached to the tops of canned goods. However, special equipment isn't always necessary. Dials and knobs can be marked with a small metal file, or with dots of fingernail polish or Elmer's Glue.

Measuring equipment

Rulers, measuring tapes for sewing, steel tapes, calipers, Click-o-Matics, t-squares and framing squares are all available with tactile markings and can be purchased from the American Foundation for the Blind, Independent Living Aids, American Printing House for the Blind, Howe Press and Science Products for the Blind.

You can buy electronic measuring equipment such as volt meters and ammeters from Science Products for the Blind.

Braille and talking clinical thermometers can be purchased from the American Foundation for the Blind and Independent Living Aids. A large print digital thermometer is available from Aids Unlimited. A scale for measuring foods as well as braille bathroom scales can be purchased from the American Foundation for the Blind, Independent Living Aids and other agencies serving local population areas.

Watches, clocks and timers

Men's and ladies' braille watches are available from many sources, including discount department stores and agencies for the blind. Shop around before buying a watch because there are many kinds available. They range from simple ones that cost \$40 or \$50 to diamond watches costing hundreds of dollars. There are differences also in the way the watches open, in the way they are wound and in the material from which the cases are made (stainless steel, gold or silver).

Clocks are available in braille, large print, digital and talking models. Some are suitable for the wall and others work best on a table or a desk. Some models are electric and others are wind-up. There also are alarm clocks and chiming clocks. You can contact agencies for the blind, local distributors, Aids Unlimited or the Massachusetts Association for the Blind to find the clock that fits your needs. The four most popular brand names for talking clocks are Sharp, Spartus, Panasonic and Casio.

Two kinds of timers are available. The one used by most homemakers can be found in local stores where kitchen accessories are sold. Even though it is not made for blind people, one can easily feel the marks for the 5-minute intervals. That is usually adequate for cooking purposes. The other timer is electronic. Aids Unlimited offers one that is powered by a small battery and fits in a pocket or purse. It could easily be set by touch.

Appliances with speech output

In this day of high technology, many of the appliances we use on a daily basis can talk to us.

Clocks, calculators, clock-calculator combinations and talking thermometers are obtainable from Aids Unlimited, the National Federation of the Blind, the American Foundation for the Blind and Science Products for the Blind.

Almost anything that has a digital readout can be adapted to have speech output. Shop around to see whether appliances you need have been modified to talk or provide a tactile communication link.

Writing paper and writing devices

Print writing aids

Most older Americans who lose their vision already know how to write, and their writing still remains legible. Therefore, it is important for them to know about some of the handwriting aids that are available. For example, American Printing House for the Blind and the Massachusetts Association for the Blind sell paper with raised lines on it. You can buy bold-lined paper with lines of various widths (1/2 inch, 7/16 inch and 9/16 inch) from the American Printing House for the Blind, American Foundation for the Blind or the National Federation of the Blind.

The Marks Writing Guide is an adjustable, full-page writing guide available from the American Foundation for the Blind. Independent Living Aids has developed a comparable device with solid plastic raised lines. Another comparable writing aid is the Arkansas Writer, which has flexible lines. A number of envelope addressers, signature guides and check writing templates are on the market. Some of these aids must be specifically ordered to fit your needs; others can be used with plain paper or envelopes. Even with the use of these writing aids, blind people may need to be reassured that their writing is still legible. If they need to review shapes of letters, there are embossed or raised letters which help in reviewing or relearning the strokes.

Checks

Most people who lose their vision still maintain a checking account. Many use regular checks with the aid of check templates. You may prefer raised line checks, which can be ordered through most banks. Many people familiarize themselves with their personal checks and type in the information, while others have someone else fill out the checks and keep only the signature as their personal responsibility. Of course, a person who truly can't write his name may make an "X" before two witnesses.

Braille writing materials and devices

Slates and styli

Slates are metal or plastic devices necessary when writing braille. They come in all shapes and sizes. If you learn to use braille, your teacher will acquaint you with their various uses and how they and other braille writing materials can be obtained. Mechanized braille writing devices that are somewhat similar in operation to typewriters are available and may appeal to you.

Games and sports equipment

Many games are available in both braille and large type. Other games need not be modified in any way for blind people to play. For instance, one can feel the dots on dice and count them. Many games marketed for the blind have been modified only slightly, but the price is often substantially higher.

Scrabble can be obtained in braille and large type from Aids Unlimited. Playing cards of various kinds are available in braille and large type from Independent Living Aids and the National Foundation for the Blind. Jumbo playing cards can often be found in local stores, from Science Products for the Blind or from novelty catalogs such as Sunset House.

Sports equipment is a broad category and includes special balls of several kinds such as soccer, Nerf, beep baseballs and others. Some can be purchased from Science Products for the Blind and some from the American Foundation for the Blind and Independent Living Aids. Bowling rails can be purchased through the American Foundation for the Blind. These rails are set up alongside the alley and help the blind bowler approach the alley in a straight line.

Contact your local agency that serves the blind to learn whether programs such as Ski-for-Life (sponsored by the Sons of Norway), beep baseballs and goal ball games are available in your area. The Missouri chapter of the United States Association of Blind Athletes and the American Blind Bowling Association might also be helpful.

Canes and travel aids

The two most common aids blind people use for travel assistance are white canes and guide dogs. There are a number of dog guide schools in the country.

White canes are available in varying lengths and are made from several materials. There are folding canes, telescoping canes, straight canes and long, crooked and rigid canes that can be constructed from wood, aluminum or fiberglass. In addition, you can purchase white canes that also lend support if you require orthopedic assistance.

Medical aids

Most of the aids that deal with the medical needs of blind people are available from the American Foundation for the Blind and from Science Products for the Blind. The products available from the American Foundation for the Blind include brailled sphygmomanometer for taking blood pressure, a brailled clinical thermometer and a medicine bottle that drops one drop at a time. There also are syringes which can be set for specific doses of insulin for use by diabetics. However, insulin syringes must be ordered for a patient by a physician or other health specialist.

Science Products for the Blind has developed several items with speech read out, such as a talking thermometer and a uricator for assisting a blind diabetic in testing his urine. If you have need of a specific device, make some inquiries to see if something new has been developed.

Aids Unlimited offers a digital read out clinical thermometer and a small medicine case with a combination lock to keep medications safe from children. Some items for the blind can be purchased in local stores. Braille pill boxes, for example, can be bought at any drugstore. Liquid medicines can be measured and administered with a reusable syringe, large dropper or with a medicine cup.

Low-vision aids

The whole field of aids for persons with low vision is a rapidly expanding field. These aids help you make the most of your remaining vision.

The available merchandise can be divided into four general categories:

- Handheld aids
- Aids which are mounted on desks or tables
- Aids on stands
- Electronic aids.

There are monocular and binocular reading and distance aids. For distance aids, there are just a few prominent manufacturers, Bausch and Lomb being the most well-known. Anyone interested should contact local optometrists and opticians for a fitting. Best of all, if your community or state has a low vision clinic or center, you can try out many aids before buying. In some areas of the country, there are low-vision training centers that offer training on the effective use of a particular aid.

The handheld aids which you may encounter have lenses of varying magnification. Some magnify with a shaded light attached. There are sheet magnifiers to cover an entire page of reading material, bar magnifiers and magnifiers with multiple lenses.

Magnifiers mounted on a desk or table include magnifiers with a fluorescent light under the rim, a high intensity light, or combinations of lights and lenses with adjustable stands to adapt the distance to the needs of the user.

Other mounted aids permit more portability, such as those that are made to be worn on the head as visors or glasses. These can be expensive, but they might enable a user to drive a car.

The fourth kind of reading aid is the electronic aid, usually a closed-circuit TV system. This kind of aid permits the use of varying sizes of type. Varying contrast of type, such as light type on dark background or dark on light background, are offered. Apollo Lasers and Visual Tech are the two best-known manufacturers.

Reading materials

Large print materials

With modern technology, countless publishers produce some materials in large type. Some material actually is printed with large type while much of it is simply enlarged from the original print. These enlarged materials have not traditionally been considered as clear and easily read as the large type presses.

Publications available in large type include a *Reader's Digest*. One source for such material is the American Printing House for the Blind. Also inquire at your local library because many libraries are now purchasing materials for special need populations.

Check with nursing homes in your area to find out if they receive such materials. They may allow you to borrow them or to visit the nursing home and read their large type collection.

There are electronic aids to magnify print. These are usually expensive and may require specialized training. The Bureau for the Blind or your local optometrist/ophthalmologist can tell you more about these electronic magnifying devices.

Materials on cassette tape or recorded discs

You may be very pleased when you learn that almost anything you wish to read is available on records or cassette. These

materials and the necessary equipment to use them are free and available by mail through a Regional Library for the Blind in St. Louis. You can access them through your contact with the Missouri Bureau for the Blind. There are even agencies in Missouri that will record specialized books or articles for you. Lots of material — not only music — is available for commercial purchase. Recordings for the Blind is a source for textual materials; materials are taped and kept in a library from which all can borrow. In the St. Louis area there is also a radio information service that broadcasts on a sub-carrier of a local FM radio station. The broadcasts include items of special interest to people who cannot read, such as grocery ads, local newspapers and special discussion programs. In order to take advantage of this service, one must apply for it and obtain a special receiving unit from the station.

Appliances for the deaf-blind

There are materials and devices particularly helpful to a person who has lost both sight and hearing.

For the individual who knows braille well, Tel-a-Touch has both a typewriter keyboard and a braille writer keyboard. The person who receives communications places a hand on a small panel where braille symbols appear. He thus reads what another person communicates. The person wishing to talk to him can either type or braille what he wishes to say, and the deaf-blind person reads it. There is no hard copy on this machine, but it is especially useful when the deaf-blind person can speak. He carries on his end of the conversation in the ordinary manner and the other person writes his responses. The Tel-a-Touch is available from the American Foundation for the Blind.

The American Brotherhood for the Blind publishes a weekly magazine for the deaf-blind called "Hot Line for Deaf Blind." It provides news in capsule form for people who might not otherwise know about current affairs.

One other appliance of real help to the deaf-blind is a timer that can be attached to the bed of a deaf-blind person to function like an alarm clock. The device vibrates and wakes the person. This is available from the American Foundation for the Blind. In order to make this a workable appliance, one must order both the vibrator and the Remind-o-Timer.

Religious periodicals, bibles and hymnals

Bibles are available in braille and large type and on records and cassette tapes. Each format has a limited number of translations. The best source for information is the American Bible Society.

Many hymnals are available in braille. A person interested in purchasing one should inquire through his local church. A number of churches have their own periodicals available in other formats. Some churches and synagogues have church school material or Bible study material on tape.

Some general religious materials are available too. Almost every major religious group provides material. Check with your local priest, minister or rabbi.

Other important information

Travel concessions and assistance on public transportation

Today there are several concessions of interest to older blind Missourians. Greyhound buslines has what it calls "Helping Hand." A person who has a statement from a physician that the person needs travel assistance can travel with a sighted assistant for the price of one full fare. This is particularly helpful for a newly blinded person who does not have the confidence or the skills to travel independently. Inquire at your local bus station.

In many cities that have a public transportation system, bus companies have established special fares for senior citizens and handicapped people. In other cities, taxi companies have special rates for senior citizens and handicapped people. You should contact local taxi companies to find out if such rates are available in your area and find out precisely how you can qualify.

Shopper assistance

Shopping is one thing that must be done whether or not you can see. It is nice to have someone along to help or someone who will shop for you. However, neither of these alternatives is always available, nor are they always the best answer. Therefore it is helpful to know that many stores have "shoppers' assistants" who will make themselves available when notified ahead of time to assist in locating merchandise in the store. Some stores also offer telephone shopping. Service clubs may have volunteers who will help with shopping. Church circles and women's groups are often glad to have such projects.

Directory assistance

In most areas of the country, telephone companies have begun to charge for information calls about the printed telephone directory. For someone who cannot read the phone book, these calls could add up. Though there is a charge, telephone companies have offered an arrangement whereby those who cannot use the phone book will be exempted from paying this charge. Contact your local telephone company business office for details.

Free matter for the blind

The United States Congress has set aside moneys that make it possible for blind, visually handicapped and physically handicapped people to mail materials free-of-charge. This includes materials received from the libraries for the blind and handicapped, as well as appliances especially designed for the blind, such as letters in braille or large print or tapes. Such mail should not be sealed or tied; however, it should be fastened firmly and mailed with the words "Free matter for the blind and handicapped" prominently placed on the letter or package. It is also helpful to cite the appropriate section of the postal manual which permits such mailing. It is Postal Code 138.

Even though articles are mailed as free matter, they may be insured for an appropriate amount if necessary.

Income tax and other tax relief

Persons who are legally blind, with vision of less than 20/20 in the better eye after correction or with an angle of vision of less than 20 degrees, qualify for an extra dependent exemption when filing the federal income tax. At the top of the 1040 Form there is a place to mark that you are taking this extra exemption. The first time you claim the exemption, you are usually required to have a doctor's statement accompanying this form.

In many states there is a double exemption for the same population to be taken on state tax forms as well.

In some states, there is property tax relief for the elderly called a homestead tax rebate or reduction that can be declared on a home you own and live in. Most of these acts also include the handicapped. If you do not qualify for this program because of your age, you may qualify because of your loss of vision. Inquire at your local county clerk's office or recorder's office to determine if you qualify.

In this guide we have tried to highlight some of the options available to you as you learn to organize your life and handle your opportunities in a new way. The aids, appliances and resources described are only a few that are available.

One of your greatest resources will be the volunteers who assist you in many ways from your families and local communities. Learning the ropes from other people who have experienced loss of vision can save you a great deal of time. By learning from them and the many other resources available to you, you will soon find your life back to "normal."

Remember to use the resources provided by the Missouri Bureau for the Blind. The Bureau will assist you in assessing your own needs and help you to acquire any of the aids and appliances described in this guide.

If you have not read the two earlier guides on vision loss in late life, be sure to obtain them through your local MU Extension center.

The Missouri Gerontology Institute develops and coordinates instruction, research and extension activities on aging among the university campuses (Columbia, Kansas City, Rolla and St. Louis), Lincoln University and MU Extension.

Order publications online at <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/shop/> or call toll-free 800-292-0969.



■ Issued in furtherance of the Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Director, Cooperative Extension, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211
■ an equal opportunity/ADA institution ■ 573-882-7216 ■ extension.missouri.edu