



VISION ISSUES

AND HOW THEY IMPACT THE VESTIBULAR PATIENT

By Claire Haddad, Boston Area Support Group Leader

Dr. Cathy Stern is a behavioral optometrist who presented at a meeting of the Boston Area Vestibular Support Group. Following are notes from her presentation. These are highlights of the meeting and should not be used as medical advice. Please consult your physician and/or your eye doctor when using this information.

Dr. Stern's presentation discussed the importance of the visual system as one of the essential inputs for good balance. When the vestibular system becomes impaired, the body tends to rely on the eyes even more. She offered the following advice for vestibular patients:

1. It is very important to see clearly when managing vestibular issues. Make sure to have regular eye exams.
2. Your prescription may have to be changed since your eyesight can be impacted by a medical problem such as a vestibular disorder.
3. Some people can be pre-disposed to an eye problem (not necessarily a vision problem) and when the vestibular system becomes impaired this "fragility" sends people "over the rail."

For example, perhaps a person's eye muscles were weak and the eyes were not working properly as a team. This may not have been an issue with a strong vestibular (inner-ear) system, however, once the vestibular system becomes impaired the underlying eye problem becomes apparent and even adds to a person's poor balance and/or poor vision.

Dr. Stern stresses that a person can have 20/20 eyesight but still have a vision problem. Some vision problems can be caused by:

- Eye tracking problems
- Eye "teaming" problems (eyes not working together as a team)
- Eye focusing problems
- Problems processing visual information

Recommendations for corrective lenses for vestibular patients:

1. Transition lenses can be problematic, although they may work for a small number of patients.
2. Wear glasses with thin frames. Thick wires or plastic on the sides of glasses may impair peripheral vision, which the vestibular patient needs to maximize their field of vision.
3. Wear a smaller lens - larger lenses can create more distortion. Consider purchasing a rimless lens.

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4. Consider wearing contact lenses to limit distortions. Bifocal lenses can be placed over them to allow for seeing near (e.g. reading).

Dr. Stern also cautioned that since vision is so important to the vestibular patient you may want to have corrective lenses for vision made at a local optical shop as opposed to a “chain.” Small, specialized optician practices tend to have less staff turnover and therefore produce higher quality prescriptions.

Certain vestibular disorders can leave the patient with impairments to the vestibular-ocular reflex. Some experience oscillopsia, a condition where the patient senses bouncing or jumping vision when they turn their head. To read more about this, please consult VEDA’s free publication on vision (visit <https://vestibular.org> and go to “Living With a Vestibular Disorder | Educational Resources).

Dr. Stern uses lenses to try to correct for oscillopsia; these are special lenses that are not the typical lenses used to correct common vision problems. She stressed that she may not be able to correct oscillopsia 100%, but the patient may feel some degree of relief.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to find an eye doctor who is able to deliver specialized vision care for vestibular patients, especially those with oscillopsia. Even major vestibular centers like the Massachusetts Eye & Ear Infirmary don’t necessarily have behavioral optometrists. In addition, their services and lenses may not be covered by insurance. Dr. Stern’s website is www.myvisiondoc.com and may be a good place to start if you are looking for a referral to a behavioral optometrist.

Dr. Stern offered the following resources for more information:

1. College of Optometrists in Vision Development, www.covd.org.
2. Neuro-Optometric Research Association, www.nora.cc

New England Eye, www.newenglandeye.org. The New England Eye has a clinic that may have behavioral optometrists. There is a Boston (near Boston University) and a Roslindale location.