

Light Sensitivity

Students with deaf-blindness may have increased sensitivity to light. This sensitivity may be variable, and have different causes, including recent or past eye surgery, medications, or a variety of different eye conditions. It might also develop, or become worse, at times of stress or anxiety or tiredness.

In some conditions a part of the iris, at the front of the eye, might be missing (known as “iris coloboma”). Visual acuity and visual fields should not be affected by a coloboma of the iris, but this problem is likely to create difficulties coping with brighter levels of light (known as “photophobia”, or fear of light), because the pupil of the eye cannot shrink in size as the level of light gets brighter. But, some people with iris coloboma show no photophobia at all, and photophobia can also sometimes be present in people who do not have iris colobomas in either eye.

The eye’s ability to block out bright light will also be adversely affected by any medication which dilates the pupil at the front of the eye. It might take some time before the effect of the medication wears off and the eye is able to shut out bright light and so avoid discomfort.

Indicators of photophobia may include squinting the eyes or covering them with an arm or a hand, holding the face down towards the floor all the time when outdoors in daylight, resistance to going outside in daylight, refusing to sit facing towards windows in the classroom, and refusing to face brightly illuminated computer screens. Some of these students may try to avoid outdoor activities, bright lights in the home or classroom, or certain types of lights (e.g., fluorescent, incandescent, or halogen). People may think the student is being difficult or stubborn when they actually are experiencing discomfort from the light.

Often, the wearing of tinted glasses and/or a sun visor or peaked cap can reduce the severity of many of these problems. With this kind of help the individual may be much more comfortable with the eyes shaded from direct light sources, and their visual functioning might also improve dramatically.

One apparent paradox is found when students who demonstrate photophobic behavior when they need clear visual information (for example, when they are walking around) also at other times deliberately gaze at bright light when they only need visual stimulation (which could be an indicator of their need to get all of their sensory systems reorganized due to tiredness, stress, or sensory overload). In other words, bright light can be great when it is just what the student needs, but it can be a big nuisance to them at other times.

If any change in the student's behavior is observed (e.g., keeping the head and face down, covering the eyes, crying, tantruming, poking the eyes, hitting the eyes or the face, pressing on or close to the eye area, preferring shadowed areas or refusing to go outside), it is important to have a vision exam to see if there have been changes in the eye or in the student's vision.

The student's glasses may also cause light sensitivity, therefore they may choose to remove the glasses for rest periods during the day. A loose cord can be attached to the glasses to prevent the student from losing them when they are taken off. These cords can be bought at drug stores or where the glasses are purchased.

California Deaf-Blind Services
San Francisco State University
1600 Holloway Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94132-4158
(415) 405-7560 VOICE/TTY
(415) 338-2845 FAX
www.cadbs.org