

Key advocacy messages on COVID-19 and Eye health



The coronavirus disease pandemic continues to have a devastating impact across the globe. It has exposed and exacerbated the vulnerabilities and inequalities within and among countries – with the poorest and most vulnerable suffering the most. The pandemic has also demonstrated the critical importance of strong and resilient health systems, including a well-resourced health workforce.

Why eye health?

Ensuring the prioritisation of eye health in Covid-19 response and recovery.

While the pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis, its implications are much more far-reaching. COVID-19 is likely to reverse gains and hamper progress on poverty eradication, food security, education and gender equity.

The eye care sector stands ready to work with countries and communities, the World Health Organization, United Nations and the wider international community both during, and as we emerge and begin to recover from the pandemic.

Eye care is essential and cannot be delayed indefinitely:

More than 2.2 billion people across the world need eye care services. Services that treat eye and ocular emergencies and irreversible causes of vision loss are critical and should be maintained in all phases of Covid-19. Where services have been suspended, governments should be mindful that this has led to a significant backlog of eye health patients. Continued delay in eye care services, particularly at a time when the risk of eye diseases is heightened due to more time spent indoors, will result in the irreversible progression of eye diseases and an increase in the rates of blindness.

The eye care sector stands ready to work with countries to provide for urgent eye health needs and build up to the return to full services, so the wider health, social and economic impacts of Covid-19 are not further amplified.

Eye health is essential to universal health coverage (UHC) and resilient health care systems:

Achieving UHC is an important objective for all countries to attain equitable, sustainable and resilient health systems and improve the well-being of individuals and communities. Eye health is key to ensuring good health and well-being. Vision impairments lead to an increased risk of mortality, impairing cardiac and respiratory function, accelerating cognitive decline and dementia, limiting physical activity and increasing the risk of non-communicable diseases.

Delivering eye care services helps sustain mental health and contribute to health targets on neglected tropical disease, financial protection and health workforce.

Leave no-one behind:

The impact of Covid-19 is felt most keenly by the poorest, most marginalised and vulnerable members of society. People with blindness or vision impairments are disproportionately affected by Covid-19 due to barriers in accessing preventive information and hygiene, reliance on physical contact with the environment or support persons and pre-existing inequalities. An inclusive approach is required to ensure that people with blindness and vision impairments are not left behind in the Covid-19 response and recovery.

Eye health cuts across many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and will support efforts to recover better:

Covid-19 has led to a reversal of development gains and a worsening of existing social and economic inequalities. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a framework for Covid-19 recovery which combines health, growth, inclusion and sustainability.

In view of the links between eye health and the SDGs, addressing vision impairments will support efforts to recover better from Covid-19 and to achieve a more resilient, inclusive and sustainable world for all.

Eye health makes an important contribution to the SDGs; ensuring healthy lives and well-being (SDG3), improving educational performance (SDG4), increasing household income and enhancing economic productivity and decent work (SDG1, SDG2, SDG8), and reducing inequalities (SDG11), including gender inequity (SDG5).

Key actions for global and national decision makers

1. Support the World Health Organisation in its role coordinating the global response to Covid-19 and supporting governments and civil society to protect the vulnerable, including those who are blind or have sight loss.

Covid-19 does not respect borders. Tackling it requires a global response based on unity, solidarity and renewed multilateral cooperation. The WHO plays an essential role in coordinating the global response to Covid-19 and supporting governments and civil society to protect the poorest and most marginalised, including those who are blind or have sight loss. It also plays a key technical role in providing guidance on the provision of eye care services during and as we recover from Covid-19. Now more than ever countries need to support the WHO and other critical multilateral institutions, including the United Nations, to save lives, protect societies and recover better.

2. Given the significant increased risks of vision impairments during lockdowns, incorporate eye health in Covid-19 health promotion have.

During lockdowns the risk of vision impairment is heightened due to a greater time spent indoors, more sedentary lifestyles, increased screen time and close work with or without screens. This can impact on the progression of diabetes and the onset of diabetic retinopathy as well as short or near sightedness, particularly amongst children. Clear and straightforward health promotion as well as timely treatment will greatly reduce the risk of progression of such conditions.

Governments, health providers and employers should incorporate eye health messaging within health promotion efforts. For both adults and children this should include taking frequent breaks from near work and screens, spending time outdoors, exercise, and being active when possible. Health promotion should also address diabetes prevention and management; and promote greater awareness of Diabetic Retinopathy (DR) to those living with diabetes.

3. Ensure a systematic inclusion of persons with blindness or vision impairments in all Covid-19 response and recovery efforts so that no one is left behind.

Persons with blindness or vision impairment face greater inequalities in accessing healthcare during the Covid-19 due to inaccessible health information and environments, as well as selective medical guidelines and protocols that may magnify the discrimination they already face in healthcare provision. Many of these challenges are not new but have been exacerbated by Covid-19. The pandemic has exposed the reality that many health systems are not responsive to the needs of those who are blind or have sight loss. The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres released a policy brief on disability inclusion in COVID-19 responses, urging governments *'to place people with disabilities at the centre of COVID-19 response and recovery efforts and to consult and engage people with disabilities.'*

Including people with blindness or a vision impairment can be done by:

- Inclusion in response planning processes and plans;
- Making information accessible;
- Ensuring access to health services;
- Ensuring access to regular services and prioritisation in social protection schemes, to ensure the wellbeing and livelihoods of people with sight loss during and post-pandemic.

4. Implement the World Health Organisation's World Report on Vision alongside strengthening health systems.

The World Report on Vision sets out the framework for countries to strengthen eye care within and across their health systems as part of Universal Health Coverage, including through the strengthening of Primary Health Care.

Countries should implement the recommendations in the World Report on Vision and specifically:

- Make eye care an integral part of Universal Health Coverage.
- Implement integrated people-centred eye care in health systems, based on strong primary health care systems.

5. Accelerate action on vision as part of the decade of action and delivery on the SDGs.

The SDGs provide a universal global vision but also sets out a framework for a Covid-19 recovery which combines health growth, inclusion and sustainability.

- Countries should adopt a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to eye health; recognising the links between eye health and education, economic growth, reduced inequities and gender equity – all of which will be key to a sustainable and inclusive Covid-19 recovery.
- Countries should include and address eye health as part of their development plans and efforts to accelerate progress on the SDGs.