



Photo Submitted by Christiana Botic to the IAPB WSD Photo Competition

POSITION PAPER

Best Practices and Minimum Standards for Near-Vision Glasses to Correct Presbyopia

Introduction

Near vision glasses are one of the simplest, most affordable and effective tools for improving lives and supporting economic growth. Almost everyone over the age of 40 experiences a natural loss of near vision, yet this can be corrected immediately and safely with near vision glasses. By restoring clear near vision, near vision glasses help people to keep working, reading, and participating fully in family, community, and the economy, sustaining livelihood, independence, and wellbeing at minimal cost.

There are no health risks associated with the proper use of near vision glasses. In many high-income countries, they are available freely over the counter, without prescriptions. However, in many low- and middle-income settings, regulations mean these safe, effective products remain inaccessible to many. This creates an unnecessary barrier to lifelong education, meaningful work and mental health, undermining the Sustainable Development Goals.

To ensure safety and quality, over-the-counter sale of near vision glasses should comply with recognised international standards of optical quality, durability and material safety, such as EN 14139, ISO 16034, ANSI Z80.31, or equivalent national regulations.

Removing the need for prescriptions decreases the cost of near vision glasses substantially, increasing access. Nearly all older adults require near vision glasses.

The IAPB recognises that significant progress has been made in many countries to establish and accredit eye care professionals, strengthening national eye health systems and ensuring the quality and safety of services. Because presbyopia is an essentially universal part of aging, over the counter near vision glasses create a unique opportunity to reach older adults at scale: a simple product that brings almost every older adult into contact with eye health messaging.

IAPB encourages its members and allies, including partners and service providers, to use that opportunity deliberately and positively. Wherever near vision glasses are distributed or sold through partner channels, this should include simple health promotion messaging, clear referral information and simple red-flag advice, so that people who may need more than near correction know when and how to seek an eye examination. Access to near vision glasses should remain straightforward for those who simply need basic near correction.

In summary, the IAPB supports unfettered and responsible, standards-based availability of near vision glasses in all countries. This represents a fundamental and inexpensive step towards poverty alleviation and reduced inequality, unlocking human potential worldwide.

The Four S's of Near Vision Glasses

Global commitments on eye health have set out a clear objective: delivery of integrated, people-centred eye care, without barriers to access. In service of this objective, and aligned with United Nations and World Health Assembly resolutions; WHO technical guidance, including SPECS 2030 and the Package of Eye Care Interventions (PECI); the WHO paper on the regulation of eye care services; and IAPB's Value of Vision and 2030 In Sight, the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) affirms that:

1. Near vision glasses are a cost-effective tool for global development **Success**.
2. They are **Safe** to use.
3. Access should be **Straightforward**, available over the counter, without a prescription, provided they:
 - a) Are manufactured to recognised international standards such as ISO 16034 (or equivalent)
 - b) Include clear labelling and consumer warnings appropriate for OTC sale such as ANSI Z80.31 (or equivalent).
4. Near vision glasses are a unique **Springboard** into wider vision care, because almost every older adult needs them. The IAPB encourages its members and allies to use near vision glasses delivery as a positive entry point to eye care. This should include simple health promotion messaging, clear referral information, red-flag advice, and language that normalises routine eye health checks, while keeping access straightforward for people who simply need basic near correction. IAPB members and allies, including partners and service providers, should also make clear that anyone with symptoms or concerns beyond simple near blur should seek an eye examination.

Q&A

What is meant by “near vision glasses”?

Near vision glasses are glasses that improve near vision for everyday close work, such as reading, sewing, or using a phone. They go by many names, including reading glasses, ready readers, ready to wear glasses, OTC (over the counter) glasses, magnifying glasses, and presbyopia glasses. In this FAQ, we use “near vision glasses” as an umbrella term for these.

What makes a pair of glasses “near vision glasses”?

Not every pair of glasses that helps someone see up close counts as “near vision glasses” in the sense we mean here. For the IAPB, the priority is public safety, so “near vision glasses” means glasses that are made to recognised standards and distributed or sold with the right safety information. In practice, that means they come from manufacturers that have medical device quality systems, with proper testing and quality checks, and records to back that up. In practical terms, near vision glasses:

- are for near tasks only, with the same strength in both lenses, within a defined range (typically +1.0D to +3.5D)
- are for simple near blur, not more complex prescriptions like astigmatism
- have lenses that are made and fitted accurately, so they do not cause avoidable distortion or discomfort from poor alignment
- have lenses that won’t shatter and are held securely in the frame
- use frames that are safe against the skin and durable in normal use
- are clearly labelled with the lens strength, who made or supplied them, the lens spacing, and clear warnings that they are for near vision only and not for driving, distance vision, or eye protection.
- should be cosmetically acceptable

These requirements are set out in international standards such as ISO 16034, BS EN 14139, and ANSI Z80.31.

Are near vision glasses safe?

Yes. For people with straightforward age related near blur, they are safe to use when they are designed, manufactured, and labelled to recognised international standards. These standards exist to maximise public safety and place responsibility on manufacturers to make products that are safe and consistent. Labelling is part of that safety package, so people can understand the limitations, including that these glasses are for near vision only and not for driving, distance vision, or eye protection.

Why is IAPB supporting over the counter access to near vision glasses?

Peer reviewed clinical trials show that correcting near vision helps people do close work more effectively, with real productivity, livelihood, and wider social and economic benefits. Because this is a simple, safe intervention that nearly everyone needs with age, the IAPB and its members support standards based over the counter access as a public good with the potential to improve the lives of hundreds of millions of people, alongside clear advice on when to seek an eye examination for anything beyond straightforward near blur.

Why not require a prescription for near vision glasses?

For simple age related near blur, the IAPB takes the view that the public good of easy access outweighs the case for restricting sales to prescription only channels. Requiring a prescription for near vision glasses adds unnecessary cost and delay for a need that is close to universal with ageing, and easy to correct.

What happened in the UK and the USA in the mid to late 20th century provides a clear lesson. At that time in these countries, people could only obtain near vision glasses through an eye care prescription. That increased cost and friction, and triggered public backlash that ultimately contributed to legal changes which, in effect, reduced the role of eye care professions in the distribution and sale of near vision glasses.

The broader point for the IAPB is that, for near vision glasses, it is better to draw a clear line between professional eye health care and the retail sale of basic readers, particularly given the significant progress many countries have made, and are still making, in establishing and accrediting eye care professions. Because presbyopia is close to universal with ageing, over the counter near vision glasses also create a unique opportunity to reach older adults at scale, a simple product that brings almost every older adult into contact with eye health messaging. If handled well, this strengthens trust in professionals and reinforces that eye health is about much more than buying glasses, while keeping access straightforward through clear safety standards and referral advice.

What safeguards does IAPB expect for over the counter sales of near vision glasses?

Public safety is the priority. Near vision glasses should only be distributed and sold where there are clear safeguards on product quality and on the information given to the people receiving them.

At a minimum, the IAPB supports near vision glasses that are manufactured to recognised international standards for quality and safety (for example ISO 16034, BS EN 14139, and ANSI Z80.31, or equivalent standards). This includes clear, standardised labelling and warnings suitable for over the counter provision, consistent with those standards.

That said, the IAPB encourages its members and allies to go further. Because presbyopia is an essentially universal part of ageing, near vision glasses create a unique opportunity to reach older adults at scale, a simple product that brings almost every older adult into contact with eye health messaging. The IAPB therefore encourages members and allies to treat labelling and point of sale information as a public health intervention, not just compliance, but also to promote appropriate referral, signpost local eye health services, and strengthen national eye health systems.

Does over the counter access to near vision glasses undermine the eye care professions?

The IAPB believes that allowing the distribution and sale of near vision glasses without a prescription does not undermine the eye care professions, as long as members and allies take a standards based approach that puts public safety first.

In practice, that means keeping OTC near vision glasses tightly regulated for straightforward presbyopia, with enforceable product standards and clear labelling. It also means using the labelling and point of sale information to go beyond minimum requirements, with plain language prompts that encourage eye examinations, especially when symptoms suggest more than simple near blur.

It is also important to be clear about what OTC near vision glasses do and do not do. They are a safe first step for simple near blur, but they are not a substitute for eye health care. The public should be made aware that being able to see clearly does not necessarily mean your eyes are healthy.

Finally, the IAPB believes this approach can strengthen the standing of the professions by keeping a clear distinction between clinical care, meaning detecting and managing eye health problems, and the retail sale of near vision glasses.

Does over the counter access to near vision glasses mean customers' eye disease might go undiagnosed?

The IAPB recognises this as a legitimate concern. If over the counter near vision glasses are provided without good safety and health promotion information, some people may treat them as a substitute for eye examinations, and that can mean missed opportunities to detect eye diseases that may not cause symptoms early on, such as glaucoma, diabetic eye disease (including diabetic macular oedema), and age related macular degeneration.

However, the IAPB does not believe that restricting near vision glasses to prescription only channels is an effective way to solve this problem. Glaucoma is a good example: even in well resourced settings, detection and timely diagnosis remain challenging despite modern equipment and clear clinical guidance. In many settings, glaucoma detection is already low, which shows that making near vision glasses prescription only does not reliably translate into timely eye examinations at population level.

Instead, the IAPB's approach is to separate access from detection. Keep over the counter access for straightforward age related near blur, but treat labelling and point of sale information as part of the public safety package. Use plain language prompts that encourage an eye examination when there are symptoms beyond simple near blur, and normalise routine eye checks. The key message is that over the counter near vision glasses are a safe first step for simple near blur, but they are not a substitute for eye health care, and being able to see clearly does not necessarily mean your eyes are healthy.

Are there parallels with other widely used health products?

Yes. In many areas of healthcare, common needs with an acceptable safety profile are met through over the counter access, backed by clear labelling and advice on when to seek professional care. The aim is to balance public safety with access, while reserving clinical capacity for problems that truly require specialist assessment.

Pain relief is a familiar example. Medicines such as acetaminophen (Panadol/Tylenol) and acetylsalicylic acid (aspirin) are widely available without prescription because most people can use them safely for short term, straightforward symptoms when they follow label guidance. Packaging explains who should not use them, how to use them safely, and when to seek medical advice.

Near vision glasses follow the same proportional public health logic and may be even lower risk for straightforward presbyopia because feedback is immediate. People can tell straight away whether the glasses help: near vision typically goes from blurry to clear in an instant. If they do not help, or if vision remains unclear, uncomfortable, or uneven between the eyes, that is an immediate cue that something else may be going on and an eye examination is needed.

The point is not that medicines and medical devices are regulated in the same way, but that over the counter access can be appropriate when risks are manageable. For near vision glasses, risk management comes from enforceable product standards, clear warnings (for near use only), and prompts to seek an eye examination when symptoms suggest more than simple near blur.

How should near vision glasses be treated for tax and import duty purposes?

The IAPB's view is that near vision glasses should not be treated as luxury goods for tax and duty purposes. Taxes, import duties, and unnecessary customs barriers can increase the cost of a simple, effective product that nearly all older adults will need.

That does not mean removing regulation. Public safety remains essential. Near vision glasses should be designed, manufactured, tested, and labelled to recognised standards, with responsibility for product safety resting with the manufacturer. At the same time, regulation of sale and distribution should be proportionate, so that near vision glasses can be made available over the counter with clear warnings, simple health information, and advice on when to seek an eye examination.

Countries may take different approaches, including reducing import duties, reducing VAT or sales tax, simplifying customs and registration processes, or clarifying tax codes so that near vision glasses are treated differently from designer or fashion eyewear. The aim should be to improve affordability and access without weakening safety, quality, or consumer information.