

Slips, Trips & Falls

A GUIDE



Our focus is your vision

Macular Disease Foundation Australia

Macular Disease Foundation Australia is a charity with a mission to reduce the incidence and impact of macular disease in Australia. The Foundation is committed to working on behalf of the macular disease community through awareness, education, client services, research and representation.

Macular disease, including macular degeneration, is the leading cause of blindness* and severe vision loss in Australia. The Foundation funds world leading research into macular degeneration, its prevention and treatment and ultimately seeks to find a cure for this chronic disease.

As a charity, the Foundation relies upon donations, bequests and fundraising efforts to support its work. If you would like to donate to support the Foundation or its research grants program, or arrange for a bequest, please contact the Foundation.

For further information, support and guidance, or to register to receive newsletters and invitations to national education sessions or other events please contact the Foundation.

Macular Disease Foundation Australia

Helpline: 1800 111 709

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Resources Available

The Foundation has developed a comprehensive range of publications and resources. Contact the Foundation for a free information kit to help better understand macular degeneration, or other macular diseases, and to learn more about living well with low vision.



*Legal blindness

Introduction

Slips, trips and falls can happen in the home, workplace or in the local community and can result in nasty sprains, strains, broken bones, cuts or other injuries.

One in three people over 65 years have a fall in any given yearⁱ, and falls are the leading cause of injury-related hospital admissions for people over 65 yearsⁱⁱ. Falls are more common and more significant as we get older, with the risk increasing due to the natural changes that happen to our bodies as we age.

Low vision doubles the risk of fallsⁱⁱⁱ, and the central vision loss associated with macular diseases, including macular degeneration, can result in impaired balance and increased risk of falls^{iv}. Most falls are preventable, with about 50 per cent of falls occurring within homes or immediate surroundings^v.

The goal for everyone is to avoid slips, trips and falls to help ensure healthy and independent ageing. Maintaining quality of life is important to everyone, including people who have low vision.

This publication is primarily written for people with low vision along with their partners, carers, family and friends so that all can be a part of creating a 'fall free' environment.

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Slips, Trips & Falls

With increasing age there can be a decline in physical and other functions that increase the risk of falling, including poor balance, decreased muscle tone, reduced mobility and compromised vision.

Falls are a common problem for older people and are also an issue for people with low vision. A person is said to have low vision when their eyesight is limited or impaired and cannot be adequately corrected with surgery, conventional glasses or contact lenses.

The most common causes of low vision in western countries are macular degeneration, glaucoma, cataract, diabetic retinopathy, retinitis pigmentosa and other retinal dystrophies.

Macular degeneration affects one in seven Australians over the age of 50^{vi}, and the incidence increases with age. It is responsible for 48 per cent of severe vision loss in Australia^{vii}. Vision impairment dramatically increases the risk of falls by two times, and injuries such as hip fracture by four to eight times^{viii}.

The reasons for or causes of falls are known as risk factors. Some people are more likely to fall than others because they have more risk factors. Having low vision significantly increases your risk of falling. Many falls are preventable, and injuries from falls can be minimised. If you know your risk factors and actively address them, you can greatly reduce your risk of falling.

How to Minimise Slips, Trips & Falls

There are many things you can do to minimise your risk of slips, trips and falls, starting with things you can control to promote healthy living. There is also a range of services available to help you best utilise your vision, and effectively navigate and assess your environment.

Try to minimise your personal and environmental risk factors as much as possible by:

- Exercising regularly (daily if possible), focussing on balance and strength components
- Engage in leisure activities to keep active, such as attending concerts, doing gardening or craft
- Maintain a healthy diet, especially eating eye-friendly foods
- Keep actively involved with friends, family and the community
- Be sensible, use common sense and recognise limitations
- Do things safely and don't be afraid to ask for help
- Review your home environment and surrounds, and make it low vision friendly
- Have a low vision assessment and ensure necessary follow ups at home, work or in the community
- Discuss any concerns about falls with your low vision service providers
- Seek advice from low vision service organisations on aids and technology to help utilise your remaining vision

- Undertake orientation and mobility training to help you in the home and whilst 'out and about'
- If you are worried about falling or concerned about a past fall, speak to your GP and explain your concerns
- Arrange a home safety assessment and modification by an experienced occupational therapist or contact your local council to be connected to a community health team
- Manage your health and get reviews of your medication regularly
- Have a plan of how to get help in an emergency
- Take steps to minimise any harm done in the event of a fall

There are two main areas of risk for slips, trips and falls to consider:

- **Personal Risk Factors:** things related to you; and
- **Environmental Risk Factors:** things about your surroundings, either at home or when you go out.



Personal Risk Factors

Often we don't notice normal age-related bodily changes as they happen very slowly over a number of years. For example, it may be harder to get out of a lounge chair you've had for 20 years. The lounge chair hasn't changed, but you have! Your muscles may have gotten a bit weaker and your joints a bit stiffer.

Personal risk factors include:

- **Vision loss** can decrease your ability to judge distances and depth, and to cope with sudden changes in light levels or glare
- **Difficulties with balance, weaker muscles and stiffer joints** can change the way we walk and move around confidently
- **Feet and leg changes** can include less feeling in the feet and legs, increased likelihood of pain, and changes to the shape of our feet
- **Reaction times** may be slower and it may become more difficult to concentrate on several things at the one time
- **Other health problems** that can make it more likely that you will fall include stroke, Parkinson's disease, arthritis, diabetes, low blood pressure, dizziness, and poor nutrition. Even short-term illnesses, such as the flu or surgery, can temporarily increase your risk of falling
- **Osteoporosis** (a condition where the bones become fragile and brittle^{ix}) means you may be more likely to break or fracture a bone if you fall

What you can do:

- Have regular check-ups with your eye health care professional to ensure you are doing everything possible to best utilise your current level of vision
- See your local low vision service provider to ensure you have the skills, aids and technology to enable you to get around safely
- Have regular check-ups with your doctor to ensure your medical conditions are well managed and medications are regularly reviewed
- Be especially careful when you are ill, for example, with the flu
- Discuss any concerns you have with your doctor before they become larger and more difficult problems
- Keep as active as possible, including regular physical activity for 30 minutes every day (if possible)
- Eat a well balanced diet (especially eating eye-friendly foods) and drink an adequate and appropriate amount of water, especially in hot weather
- Stand up slowly after lying down or sitting
- Take care when bending down and make sure you are steady before walking
- Allow adequate time for eyes to adjust to different levels of light, especially when going inside after being outdoors

Mobility

Physical activity keeps us healthy and reduces the risk of falls. Regular exercise improves balance, strength, mobility and reaction time, and can reduce the risk of injury following a fall^x. As you get older, physical fitness is essential for everyday tasks, such as getting in and out of chairs, carrying the shopping or lifting the grandchildren.

Those with low vision and people who feel unsteady on their feet may over time do less walking. Consequently, muscles can get weaker and joints stiffen, lessening our ability to be well balanced.

There are many activities to help keep you fit and healthy at the right pace, such as, walking, swimming, tai chi, yoga, dancing, or home or group exercises. There are also various team sports for people with low vision such as blind golf, bowls and cricket. Just getting out of the house for cards, bingo or a local community event keeps us active.

Being physically active also helps manage chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, arthritis, diabetes and depression.

What you can do:

- Keep as active as you can. Physical activity maintains health and helps to improve balance, muscle strength and flexibility
- Consider orientation and mobility training if you have low vision and need help in navigating around your home, neighbourhood or wider community
- Contact your local council for information on local activities
- Check with local seniors groups about what activities they may offer
- Call Blind Sports Australia for information on sporting organisations and activities for people with low vision



“With deteriorating central vision due to wet macular degeneration in both my eyes, I find it difficult to read the numbers on the buses as they approach. Guide Dogs gave me a cane and training sessions in its use. The buses now stop when they see my cane and the bus driver announces the bus number. The cane also helps me to gauge the height and width of the steps and to recognise rough surfaces and gaps in walking areas.”

Margaret Gannon

Medicines

Some types of medication can increase your risk of falling because of possible side effects such as drowsiness, confusion, unsteadiness and dizziness.

What you can do:

- Ask your pharmacist about using a special pack, specifically designed for those who are blind or have low vision, to help keep track of medication, dosage and times
- If you take many different medicines, ask your doctor about a home medicine review with your pharmacist to help sort out all your medication
- Tell your doctor if you are concerned or if you detect any unusual side effects when you are starting a new medicine. This is important because medicines affect different people in different ways
- Keep a list of all your prescription and non-prescription medicines
- Consult your doctor if you are taking a supplement to ensure there are no contradictions with the medication you are currently taking
- Follow the instructions on the label
- Clean out the medicine cupboard once a year and ask for help if you have difficulty reading the labels
- Alcohol can react with medicines, so check the labels or ask your doctor or pharmacist
- Good vitamin D and calcium levels are important for health and wellbeing to keep your bones strong. As we get older we require vitamin D to help calcium absorption, and higher levels of calcium to help with building and maintaining bones. Talk to your doctor if you think your intake is not sufficient as you may need to take a supplement
- Always consult your doctor on any concerns you have related to your medications

Feet & Footwear

As we age, our feet can change shape and lose some feeling. This changes the way we walk and affects balance. Painful or swollen feet can make it difficult to walk. Some shoes or slippers can make you more likely to slip, trip or stumble, leading to a fall.

What you can do:

- Purchase comfortable, firm-fitting, flat, shoes and slippers with rounded, low, broad heels and slip-resistant soles that grip
- Don't wear poorly fitted slippers or walk in socks
- See a doctor or podiatrist if you have painful or swollen feet, tingling or pins and needles, or if you have any changes in the shape of your feet, such as bunions
- If you have difficulty finding suitable shoes because of foot problems, visit a podiatrist
- Consult your doctor about a referral to a podiatrist or physiotherapist

Fearing a Fall

If you have had a bad fall, it is natural to feel worried about falling again. Some people become fearful of falling even if they haven't yet fallen, because of unsteadiness, or the thought of injury from a fall. People who are worried about falling sometimes restrict their activity, gradually doing less and less and losing their confidence.

What you can do:

- Talking with a low vision specialist, doctor, psychologist, social worker or counsellor can help you regain your confidence, or address your concerns, particularly if your fear is very strong or if you are feeling lonely or isolated
- Orientation and mobility training can help to provide support, skills and aids and technology whilst getting out and about
- Some people simply require an aid to help gain confidence with mobility
- Make your home and surroundings safer for you to move around
- Make a plan for getting help in an emergency in the event of a fall



Environmental Risk Factors

Making your home and surroundings as safe as possible is important because it is where 50 per cent of falls occur. Most falls occur on level surfaces within commonly used rooms, so making your environment as safe as possible will significantly reduce your risk of falls.

Home, Garden & Community

Our abilities change as we age, increasing the chances of us slipping and tripping. In many cases our homes age too, through general wear and tear or lack of maintenance. Often we don't notice this because we have lived there for many years without any problems. It is important to check your surroundings and take steps to make them safer.

Apart from hazards in the household surroundings, some of the dangers can arise from the way you choose to do things. For example, climbing onto a kitchen chair to reach into a high cupboard puts you in danger. Instead, you could keep the item in a place that is easier to reach. A simple thing like wearing clothes or dressing gowns that are too long and loose and can catch on things can cause an accident, so appropriate clothing is important to remember.

Take time to stop, 'press the pause button' and use common sense. Think about different and safer ways of doing things in the home and the garden. Act immediately to rectify a problem and don't be afraid to ask for help for the simplest of tasks.

The following are some tips which can help increase safety. When you are checking your home for hazards it is a good idea to get help from somebody to identify the risks for falls. Ideally this person should be one that has not seen your home before, especially if you have lived there for a long time. An outside person may spot problems in the home to which you have grown accustomed.



“Going to the Association for the Blind to take advantage of the many services they offer is one of the best things I’ve ever done. They helped me to make my home safer for me to move around in so that I maximise my sight, and minimise the risk for slips, trips and falls.”

Jo Thomas

Fall Prevention Tips

The following tips can help to minimise the risk of slips, trips and falls in your environment:

General Hazards

- Keep floors free of clutter by removing unnecessary cords, cables and rugs and keeping walkways free
- Avoid placing fans and heaters in walkways or in the middle of the room
- Coil or tape cords and cables next to a wall, or tape down under furniture
- Remove all loose mats and rugs or ensure they are firmly secured and have slip-resistant backing
- Make sure quilts, bed-spreads and curtains do not fall across the floor
- Remove or repair torn or stretched carpet, or mats that curl or fold easily
- Pick up dropped food and always wipe up liquid spills carefully as soon as they occur
- Attach slip-resistant rubber tread on stairs
- Attach a contrasting, non-slip strip on the front edge of the steps
- Contrasting tape is very useful for highlighting edges on stairs, walls or other obstacles
- Make obstacles or hazards stand out. For example, have your furniture a contrasting colour to the walls and floor
- Avoid heavily patterned floor coverings as they can make it hard to see small obstacles or the edges of steps because they blend in with the surroundings
- Do not polish floors
- Outside, try to remove anything that throws shadows across paths
- Keep outside paths clear of moss, slime and fallen leaves
- Fit a 'draught excluder' to the bottom of the door, rather than using a 'door sausage' that can be tripped over
- Remove, or mark, even small changes in floor level with contrasting colour or tape so it is easily seen
- Choose outside door mats with sloping edges
- Don't leave things lying around the garden, remember to roll up the hose and put away garden tools
- Check outdoor paths for cracks and uneven areas, and make repairs as soon as possible
- Dogs and cats like to be close, so check where your pet is located before you move

Lighting

- Place lighting in dark areas, particularly in frequently used areas
- Make sure you have good lighting and avoid poorly lit places
- Allow time for eyes to adjust when walking from light to dark areas, and vice versa. Place a chair near the back door so when entering from outside there is somewhere to wait until the eyes adjust to the light
- Make sure when outside you wear sunglasses (or fit-overs) and a hat to reduce glare
- Don't forget to turn lights on before you walk around
- Ensure light switches are easy to reach
- Two way light switches can help in corridors, on stairs, or in rooms where there is more than one entry
- Decrease daytime glare with curtains or blinds on your windows
- At night, you may like to leave lights on in the passage way or consider low voltage night lights
- In outdoor places where you might walk, consider using sensor lights
- Have a light or torch within easy reach of the bed
- Bring a pen light with you when going out to offer extra light when required

Staying Upright

- If possible, install handrails in the bath, shower, toilet and other difficult areas
- Use a seat in the shower or bath if it is convenient and safe
- Be careful if you have a hob or step to get into the shower
- Use non-slip mats in wet areas such as the shower and bathroom
- Use handrails whenever they are available, especially when walking up stairs, and take your time.
- If renovating or moving make sure floors are of a non-slip material
- Avoid using talcum powder on tiles, vinyl or wooden floors, as it makes them very slippery
- Avoid anything that involves you getting up higher than floor level, but if necessary use a sturdy step ladder and take care
- Don't put pride before a fall! Stay upright!

Going Out & About

- If you use a mobility aid, visual aids, glasses or hearing aid, always remember to take them with you
- Keep aids in a regular, familiar place in the home so they are 'ready to go'
- Pay attention to your surroundings, including unsafe surfaces, obstacles, animals and children
- Take extra care on public transport, such as buses, trams, ferries and trains
- Have your fare or ticket ready before getting on a bus, and ask the driver not to move off until you are seated
- If you notice a hazard in a public place (for example footpath or shopping centre), you should consider reporting it to the appropriate authority. Many councils and shopping centres are grateful to be informed, and it may prevent someone else from falling



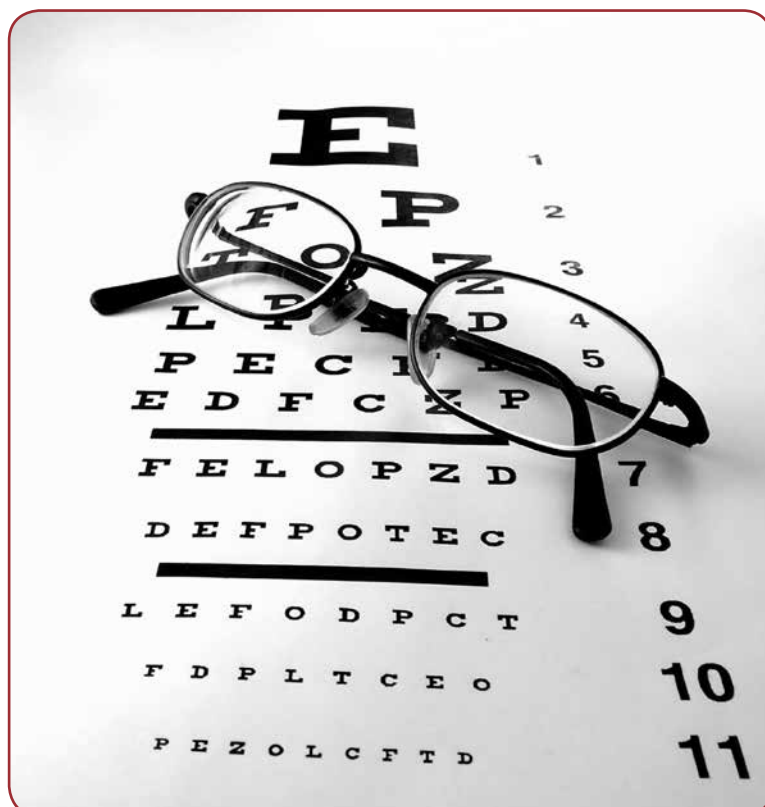
“Before I leave home I have my checklist of aids to make sure I’m prepared – I have my visor, cap and fit-overs to reduce glare, my magnifier and magnification glasses in case I need to read something, my monocular for distance viewing and my identification cane.”

Fran Cutler

Additional Tips

Additional tips that may be useful in reducing risk to prevent falls include:

- Keep frequently used items in the same places so they are easy to reach
- Think about the safest and most convenient place in your home for each thing you do
- Chairs with solid armrests are easier from which to get in and out
- Work to your own pace and capability
- Avoid rushing and allow plenty of time to get to a destination
- Consider access to the bathroom at night, and ensure a safe pathway to reach the toilet
- Remove clutter, particularly things that can hurt you in the event of a fall, such as a glass coffee table
- Try to keep the home well maintained as much as you are able to
- Talk to an occupational therapist about equipment that may make activities of daily living easier and safer. For example, using a bath board or bath seat if your shower is over the bath, or use blocks to raise the height of the bed
- If chores are becoming difficult consider what is essential, and what you can realistically do safely. If possible arrange for help to reduce the risk of unnecessary falls
- Walking aids can assist you by making you more safe and independent



Making a Plan to Get Help

It is important to think ahead and make a plan of things you can do to safeguard yourself. This will help you to feel not only safer, but more confident and in control.

Having a good plan will also be reassuring to your family and friends. Involve them in your plans so that they know what you have done, how they can help, and what they may need to do for you in the event of an emergency. If you live alone, or are alone for long periods, it is even more important to have your plan organised to get help quickly.

The damage done by any fall depends on how, where and when we land, the strength of our bones and skin, and how quickly help comes. Most falls happen from standing height.

The damage done by a fall increases if the fall is from any extra height, even a single step. It is also increased if you hit something on the way down. Falling outside in very hot, cold or bad weather can also stress our bodies, especially if it is not possible to get help for a while.

The aim of the emergency plan is to get help as soon as possible to reduce the impact of the accident and to minimise any distress. Making a good plan of what to do in the event of a fall or another emergency will involve how to call help and how the help will get to you.

There are many types of devices to raise the alarm in the event of an emergency such as a mobile phone in your pocket on which you can dial 000, or alternatively a device or personal alarm that initiates a call for help when activated. If you live alone, consider asking a person or special service to call and check on you at the same time every day.

Remember the person who comes to help you needs to be able to get into the home. You need to give careful consideration to this matter if you decide to leave a spare key with another person.

Make a list of people or organisations you can call in case of an emergency. Understand which number you would call in different circumstances to get the right type of help. Keep this list in key areas such as your wallet, on the refrigerator or next to the phone at home. Always have your 'in case of an emergency' contact clearly marked.



“After a foot operation, I attended a local Falls Prevention Program and they taught me balance and strength exercises, and gave movement tips to help prevent falls. They also showed me how to get up safely if I did have a fall. I found the course very helpful, and now feel more confident whilst out walking.”

Jean Morton

What To Do If You Have a Fall

Even though most falls don't result in serious injury, many people are unable to get up without help. Therefore, it is important to think ahead and make a plan of things you can do to safeguard yourself.

If You Fall:

- Don't panic, **STAY CALM.** Catch your breath and compose yourself after the shock
- Check your body. If you are not badly injured you can think about getting up. If you are injured, for example with a broken bone, you need to stay where you are and put your plan to get help into action
- Make a decision whether or not to get up
- If you are not seriously injured, find a sturdy piece of furniture, such as a chair, and use the furniture to assist you to stand
- From your position, roll onto your side, and crawl or drag yourself to the chair
- From a kneeling position, put your arms up onto the seat of the chair
- Bring one knee forward and put that foot on the floor
- Push up with your arms and legs, and pivot your bottom around
- Sit down. Rest before trying to move.
- Assess your injuries and call help if required



If You Cannot Get Up:

- Do not panic, **STAY CALM**
- Check your body for injuries
- Think calmly about all the possibilities for raising the alarm, getting help or moving. Take your time and work to your prepared plan or think through your actions calmly to attract attention and help. It is likely you will know the patterns of people and activities around you and you will know the ideal time to call out to attract attention. You may be able to slowly and carefully drag yourself to a phone or a place where you will be noticed. All of this will depend upon the circumstances at the time
- Try to stay warm if possible
- Gently move around if possible to stop one part of your body getting too much pressure
- Seek professional medical help immediately to treat any injuries

After a Fall

- It is important to talk to your doctor about your fall and the possible causes, and to tell someone else (family, friend or neighbour) that you have fallen
- Your doctor may refer you to government aged care or disability care programs to help you prevent future falls (eg personal assistance at home, installing handrails or other home modifications, or accessing low vision aids and technologies)
- When you have recovered, reflect on the incident and identify the reasons or contributing factors that resulted in your fall. Take positive steps to minimise your risk of another fall and any harm done in the event of a fall



Safety Checklist

The following checklist aims to broadly cover ways in which you can minimise your risk of slips, trips and falls. If you respond 'no' to any of the following checklist items, you should consider making changes to improve your overall safety.

- ☐ Are your floors free of clutter?
- ☐ Are all carpets and mats flat and with slip-resistant backing?
- ☐ Are all cords away from walkways?
- ☐ Do you clean spills as soon as they occur?
- ☐ Are your lights bright enough for you to see clearly?
- ☐ Are stairs well lit?
- ☐ Are you able to see the edges of steps clearly?
- ☐ Do you have handrails in the bath and shower?
- ☐ Can you easily reach items you regularly use, such as kitchen utensils?
- ☐ Is your telephone within easy reach?
- ☐ Is your furniture arranged so you do not have to stretch or lean too far?
- ☐ Can you turn on a light before you get out of bed?
- ☐ Can you get in and out of bed easily?
- ☐ If you have a walking aid, is it kept within easy reach?
- ☐ Do you wear low, comfortable shoes and slippers with slip-resistant soles?
- ☐ Does your clothing fit securely without dangling cords or hems?
- ☐ Can you use your walking aid easily and comfortably, and is it in good condition and well maintained?
- ☐ Are paths and gardens well lit, in good repair and free from trip hazards?
- ☐ Are emergency numbers easy to access and near your telephone?
- ☐ Do you have a personal alarm or carry a mobile phone with you?

To reduce your risks of falls, remember to:

- ☐ Make your home and its surroundings as safe as possible
- ☐ Exercise regularly
- ☐ Keep actively involved with family, friends and in the community
- ☐ Get regular medical and vision check-ups
- ☐ Eat a healthy diet
- ☐ Be sensible and recognise your limitations
- ☐ Ask for help

Service Directory

My Aged Care

Tel: 1800 200 422

www.myagedcare.gov.au

Australian Podiatry Association

Tel: (02) 9698 3751

www.podiatry.asn.au

Australian Physiotherapy Association

Tel: 1300 306 622

www.physiotherapy.asn.au

Beyond Blue

Tel: 1300 224 636

www.beyondblue.org.au

Blind Sports Australia

Tel: (03) 8378 1137

www.blindsports.org.au

Centrelink

Age pension 132 300

Disability pension 132 717

www.humanservices.gov.au

Department of Health

Tel: 1800 020 103

www.health.gov.au

Department of Veterans' Affairs

Tel: 133 254

www.dva.gov.au

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

Tel: 1800 800 110

www.ndis.gov.au

Lifeline

Tel: 131 114

www.lifeline.org.au

Occupational Therapists Australia

Tel: 1300 682 878

www.ausot.com.au

Optometry Australia

Tel: (03) 9668 8500

www.optometry.org.au

Osteoporosis Australia

Tel: 1800 242 141

www.osteoporosis.org.au

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Our focus is your vision

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