



The UK National Eye-health and Hearing Study: How many people in the UK have sensory loss?

Images courtesy of the UKNEHS and Rupert Bourne

Joanna Hodgkinson,
Head of Research

How many people in the UK have glaucoma, and what proportion of those don't know it? We often quote the figures of 700,000 people in the UK having glaucoma, and half of them not knowing. But that's an estimate, and not a very reliable one at that. As a society, we also cannot answer this very reliably for other sight and hearing conditions.

The UK National Eye-health and Hearing Study (UKNEHS) wants to answer these questions. It is the first of its kind in the UK to try and establish the extent of undetected vision and hearing loss in the community. By detecting these early, we can prevent most of these individuals losing their sight or hearing.

What is the UK National Eye-health and Hearing Study (UKNEHS)?

The UKNEHS is a national research project seeking to identify how many people in the UK are experiencing undetected vision and hearing loss. A representative population of 25,000 people aged 50 or over from across the UK will be invited to take part. Glaucoma UK is one of many organisations supporting the study. Others include:

- fellow charities such as RNIB and the Royal National Institute for Deaf People;
- manufacturers of instruments used to detect vision and hearing problems, such as Heidelberg Engineering, who make visual field testing machines;
- professional societies such as the Royal College of Ophthalmologists;
- public sector bodies such as the Department of Health.

It is being run by Professor Rupert Bourne, based at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge.

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What are the aims of the study?

The UKNEHS will provide data about how many people in the UK need eye and hearing care. That will enable care providers to plan the services. For example, we know the number of people in the UK with glaucoma is likely to grow, and therefore our glaucoma services need to grow. But by how much, and how fast? How many ophthalmologists, optometrists and other professionals will we need in the coming years to be able to meet the needs of those people with glaucoma? The UKNEHS will help us answer those questions, as well as other questions such as how well new services are working.

Importantly, it will also help the government ensure that vulnerable groups are accessing the services they need to reduce preventable sight and hearing loss, including from glaucoma. They will be able to target spending more effectively and efficiently towards the areas of greatest need.



Rupert Bourne, UKNEHS Chief Investigator told us, “The data that the full UKNEHS project will give us are vital. They will enable us to understand how unmet need is distributed across the UK and support evidence-based service development. It will also allow us to establish the baseline for future evaluations of new interventions and treatments for hearing and eye health.”

How does it work?

A group of 25,000 people within the UK, aged 50 and over, will be invited to participate. They will complete a comprehensive eye and hearing examination, and a standardised general questionnaire. If any problems are found, they will be referred via the appropriate local pathway to receive treatment. The UKNEHS will be among the most technologically advanced health research projects in the world.

What progress has been made?

The UKNEHS is currently in the pilot stage. This is checking that examinations planned

by the researchers are feasible, collect the necessary data, and are manageable for participants. There are two elements: care homes and community. It's important participants with cognitive impairments such as dementia are included, so the team have been working in care homes in Cambridgeshire to ensure this. The community testing phase involves inviting participants from randomly selected postcodes within Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. It is also looking at how to engage the community in the study and encourage participation. By the time you read this, we hope the data collection phase will be finishing, and the analysis and evaluation will begin.

What are the next steps?

The next steps will be to evaluate the pilot stages. The researchers will then refine the methods used in the study and start planning the national roll-out. Such an enormous national study is obviously expensive – it will probably cost around £16m over three years. The team are therefore seeking more funding to cover the cost of the project, which may be provided by the government.

Can I get involved?

The postcodes selected to participate in this study will be randomly selected, so unfortunately you can't sign up as a participant. However, you can still play a role. We believe this is a really important study, and want to encourage anyone invited to participate. At this stage, the most important thing you can do is act as an ambassador: if you hear people talking about it, reassure them it's a valuable and legitimate piece of work. They may even benefit directly if a sight or hearing condition is detected early.