

## **Staff Shortages and Surgical Backlogs Causing Vision Loss in Canada**

*The Canadian Council of the Blind and Fighting Blindness Canada's Report Card on Vision Health in Canada shows that progress in vision care is slow as COVID-19 pandemic continued in 2021.*

**OTTAWA, Ontario – October 13, 2022 – World Sight Day** – “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Vision Health in Canada 2021” report card found that vision care in Canada has not returned to pre-pandemic levels due to significant staff shortages, surgical backlogs and people not keeping their doctor appointments or having their regular eye examinations.

**Despite substantial commitments from governments of over \$2 billion across Canada to provide capacity to clear the backlog of people needing treatment**, wait times and the delivery of eye care have not returned to pre-pandemic levels, underlying the urgent need for a national eye care strategy.

Canadians cannot access specialized care to prevent blindness, despite the fact that 3 out of 4 people can stop vision loss with early diagnosis and access to treatments. Two-thirds of Canadians have not had an eye exam in the past year, and it is estimated that there were 108,000 fewer eye surgeries performed in Canada in 2021 compared to 2019. There were 1.8 million fewer optometrist visits in 2021 compared to 2019.

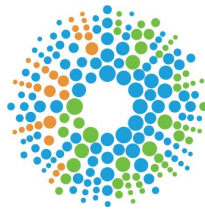
Report card highlights:

### **Progress in vision care is happening, but not quickly enough.**

- The current study found that the number of eye surgeries had increased by 25% in 2021 compared with 2020 but 108,000 fewer eye surgeries were performed in 2021 compared to 2019.
- However, this number was still 20% below 2019, indicating a persistent gap in surgery capacity.
- The net result is that surgical volumes in 2021 did not return to pre-pandemic levels and the surgical wait times continued to grow, leading to vision loss that could have been prevented.

### **Despite funding, staff shortages remain a critical issue.**

- In March 2022, the federal government announced that \$2 billion would be available to provinces to reduce the surgical backlog.
- Despite this, the backlog continued to grow due to staff shortages including being ill due to COVID-19 or severe burnout.



- A survey conducted by Statistics Canada in 2021 reported that 25 to 40% of health care workers were considering leaving their place of employment or changing their jobs. This is of concern as the health care system struggles to overcome the continued impact of the pandemic.

The backlog of specialized eye care has led to severe and, in some cases, irreversible outcomes for certain Canadians living with vision loss. Canadians with vision loss continue to be underserved, and many are going blind or losing vision despite the medications and treatments available.

It is crucial that we design systems and policies that correct this dangerous trend. Visit [StopVisionLoss.ca](https://stopvisionloss.ca) and sign the petition asking the Canadian government to deliver a national eye care strategy and to address the backlog in eye care that is leading to today's preventable blindness crisis.

#### Statements:

- “While we saw some progress on vision health care in Canada in 2021, we are nowhere near pre-pandemic levels. This is adding to the crisis of preventable blindness. Even with funding commitments from federal and provincial governments, staff shortages mean eye care is majorly under-resourced in Canada,” says **Dr. Keith Gordon, Principal Investigator for the Report Card and Research Officer, Canadian Council of the Blind**. “It is critical for Canadians to understand the importance of managing their vision health, and that they can access care and treatment in a timely manner. The time is now for passage of Bill C-284 to implement a national eye care strategy.”
- “Our health care system continues to face critical challenges brought on by the pandemic. Our latest findings on the state of vision health care in Canada show that despite some progress, we are still facing a crisis when it comes to surgical backlogs and growing wait times to access critical eye care,” says **Doug Earle, President and CEO, Fighting Blindness Canada**. “Canadians need to take urgent steps to stop preventable blindness by receiving an eye examination and signing our petition for a national eye care strategy at [StopVisionLoss.ca](https://stopvisionloss.ca). Together we can stop preventable blindness in Canada.”
- “Optometrists play a critical role in examining patients and identifying preventable diseases that cause vision loss. We care about our patients, and it is concerning that they wait to receive eye care when we know the importance of treating these

conditions as soon as possible,” said **Stephanie Kwan, Optometry Partner, Specsavers in Hamilton, Ontario**. “Not only do Canadians need to get their vision checked at least every two years, but they also need to ensure they are receiving a comprehensive eye exam. Specsavers has found that using Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT) is helping optometrists to identify early-stage eye disease and manage these patients effectively with accurate referrals. Our data shows that 34% of patients who were assessed with OCT had signs of vision-threatening diseases.”

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### **About “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Vision Health in Canada 2021”**

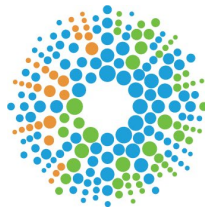
The Canadian Council of the Blind and Fighting Blindness Canada conducted a follow-up study to the Cost of Vision Loss and Blindness in Canada report. The follow-up was intended to review the current state of vision health in Canada, the current impact of the pandemic on people living with vision loss, and the overall vision health of Canadians in 2021. Quantitative data from various Canadian sources were combined with quantitative and qualitative data from a new survey of Canadians living with vision loss, conducted in July 2022. In addition, interviews were conducted with ophthalmologists, optometrists, and vision care stakeholder organizations to determine whether the quantitative data is supported by their lived experience. The 2022 Report Card on Vision Health in Canada 2021 was made possible by unconditional grants from a number of Canada’s leading research-based pharmaceutical companies, corporate partners, and key members and stakeholders of the vision loss community. The Canadian Council of the Blind and Fighting Blindness Canada would like to express our appreciation to Alcon, AbbVie Allergan, AGTC, Bayer, Novartis, Roche and Specsavers for their generous support.

### **About the Canadian Council of the Blind**

The Canadian Council of the Blind (CCB) is the Voice of the Blind™ in Canada, a membership-based charity that brings together Canadians who are living with vision loss, the blind, deaf-blind, and partially-sighted. Advocating for its members, the CCB works to promote a sense of purpose and self-esteem along with an enhanced quality of life. Based on a belief in ability, not disability, the CCB is a vibrant network of active members across Canada. Each chapter is unique to its geographic area and engages in a variety of social and recreational activities based on the interests of its local members. Visit [CCBNational.net](https://CCBNational.net) or call 1-877-304-0968 for more information.

### **About Fighting Blindness Canada**

Fighting Blindness Canada (FBC) is the largest charitable funder of vision research in Canada. FBC has invested over \$40 million to research sight-saving cures and treatments for blinding eye diseases. With the support of its generous donors, FBC has funded over 200 research grants which have led to over 600 discoveries such as stem cell treatments, neuroprotective therapies,



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