Blinded by the Light

By Gary Esterow

Vision Problems and Visual Discomfort Make Driving in the Dark Difficult, Uncomfortable for Most Americans

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (October 29, 2007) – As millions of Americans prepare to set the clocks back an hour on November 4 and see fewer hours of daylight, findings from a new survey raise concerns for drivers, passengers, and pedestrians about what people may not be seeing while driving in the dark. Of further concern, while most believe that correcting their vision problems would improve their ability to drive in low-light conditions, many have never talked to an eye care professional about treatment options.

Nearly one of every three drivers on the road (32 percent) say they have difficulty seeing all or most of the time while driving in the dark according to Shedding Light on Driving in the Dark, a nationwide survey conducted by Kelton Research on behalf of Road & Travel Magazine and ACUVUE® Brand Contact Lenses. More than one-fourth (26 percent) report that they have trouble seeing signs or exits; one-fifth (20 percent) acknowledge difficulty seeing animals or pedestrians, and one-fifth (20 percent) also have difficulty with seeing turns in the road. More than one in five (22 percent) also report problems in judging distance while driving in the dark.

A total of 515 vision-corrected Americans aged 18 and over participated in the survey. Nearly a quarter (23 percent) of respondents expressed concern and a lack of confidence about their driving skills in the dark. Vision problems and discomfort also leave them feeling concerned (24 percent) and unsafe (21 percent) behind the wheel.

“Driving in the dark is one of the most hazardous situations faced by a driver,” says Courtney Caldwell, founder and editor-in-chief of Road & Travel Magazine. “Roads with low or no lighting, glare from headlights, and fluctuations in vision are contributing factors to the disproportionately high rate of car accidents and fatalities that occur between dusk and dawn.” Both the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the National Safety Council site the fatality rate at nighttime (6:00 P.M. – 6:00 A.M.) to be three times higher than the daytime rate.

Respondents complained of eyestrain (38 percent), dry or tired eyes (34 percent), fatigue (25 percent), headaches (19 percent), inability to focus (18 percent) and double or blurred vision (15 percent) while driving in the dark. More than six in ten (61 percent) say that headlights from oncoming traffic or from cars behind them are particularly bothersome, and nearly half (48 percent) report experiencing glare or light sensitivity while driving in the dark.

“Low light levels cause an eye’s pupil to dilate, which can accentuate any existing focusing problems and result in blurred vision,” explains Dr. Elise Brisco, a Los Angeles based optometrist. “This is particularly common among people with astigmatism because the shape of the cornea prevents light from focusing properly on the retina, often leading to blurred vision, which can impair a driver’s speed of visual reaction time and affect the ability to quickly identify and localize possible hazards on the road.”

About two-fifths (39 percent) of respondents said they have been diagnosed or treated for astigmatism, a common vision condition in which surfaces of the eye, including the cornea, have an oval shape. Compared to the overall vision-correction population, people with astigmatism were significantly more likely than other vision-corrected respondents to report being disturbed

by glare or light sensitivity (55 percent vs. 48 percent of others) and halos or starburst patterns around lights (39 percent vs. 28 percent) when driving in the dark.

Alarmingly, while 73 percent of respondents believe that correcting their vision problems could improve their night time driving, only 27 percent have ever consulted an eye care professional about treatments or products that could improve their vision while driving in the dark.

"Any vision problem left uncorrected or under-corrected can result in tragic consequences for drivers, passengers, and pedestrians," notes Dr. Brisco. "A comprehensive eye exam will include testing to diagnose potential problems and determine the correct form of treatment, such as a new pair of glasses or contact lenses."

Other findings from the survey, which assessed attitudes, perceptions, practices and experiences with driving in low-light conditions included the following:
* One-fifth (21 percent) of respondents report blurred distance vision during low-light conditions, while a smaller number (5 percent) say they have some blurriness and difficulty in seeing the dashboard or dials.
* Women (70 percent) are significantly more likely than men (49 percent) to say that they have difficulty seeing or experience visual discomfort when driving in the dark.
* Only talking on the phone or text messaging (29 percent) was considered to be more distracting than having trouble seeing or experiencing visual discomfort (27 percent) while driving in the dark.
* Americans in the 18-49 age bracket were significantly more likely than those age 50 and older to report having difficulty driving in the dark all or most of the time (36 percent vs. 20 percent).
* Sedan and sports car drivers report having a harder time spotting animals or pedestrians than SUV and truck drivers (24 percent vs. 18 percent).

Because of their feelings of discomfort behind the wheel under low-light conditions, about one quarter (24%) of Americans say that they ask someone else to drive when it is dark. Others alter their driving habits by driving more slowly than usual (42 percent) or traveling in familiar areas or on well-lit roads (30 percent). Women and parents of children under age 18 are significantly more likely than men and those with no children to take extra precautions.

To view the findings from the survey, along with information about driving in the dark, visit www.acuvue.com/press.htm.