NOAH

Information about Albinism

National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation

What Do You See?

An Adult with Albinism's Description of what he sees

One of the most common questions those of us with albinism get from normally sighted people is, "what do you see?" This question is also one of the most worrisome questions parents of children with albinism have. Normally sighted people are often baffled when we tell you our vision is NOT "blurry". So how is it that we have below normal visual acuity, yet don't have blurry vision? I'm NOT an eye doctor, merely a young adult with albinism who is just as curious about how normally sighted people see as you are in how people with albinism see, but here's my best shot at explaining my own understanding of our vision and why it is NOT blurry:

Imagine a large, clear color photo printed on the front page of the newspaper. Now imagine that someone in the photo is wearing a golf shirt with some lettering or a logo on the shirt pocket. You look at the photo up close, trying to read the lettering printed on the shirt. To your dismay, you can't quite make it out. Overall, the picture is not blurry. Yet when you look at the small details, you just can't make them out. If you were looking at the original photo the paper used, however, you could make out those words.

So what's the difference between the original photo and the photo as printed in the paper? The difference is the resolution, or the number of dots that make up the picture. In other words, the picture in the newspaper and on film is really a bunch of individual dots that are different colors. The picture printed in the newspaper is made up of fewer dots than the picture on film. Therefore, each dot covers a larger portion of the total picture and the amount of fine detail you can see is less. To see how a picture is made up of dots, just look at the picture on your TV screen from a few inches away. You'll be able to see the individual dots. The picture on the back of the human eye is also made up of dots - millions and millions of them! They're the "cones" and "rods" on the retina in the back of the eye. People with albinism have less of the cones then normally sighted people because of the lack of pigment. So, we have fewer "dots" to make up the picture we see.

Another trick to see how less resolution does not make a picture blurry is to look at a picture you have scanned into your computer and digitally compressed to send as an email attachment. The digital compression reduces

the number of dots in the photo so you can send it over the Internet faster. Compare the digitally compressed picture on your computer screen to the original print. You'll see more subtle details in the original photo print. If you have a digital camera, take a few pictures using your camera's highest resolution (pixel) setting, and then take a few on your camera's lowest setting. Compare the difference: None of the photos you took were blurry (we hope), but you can see more details using the high-resolution setting! The difference between how those of us with albinism see and those of you normally sighted folks see is a lot like the difference between the low resolution digital camera photo verses the high resolution picture: Neither is blurry, however, we can't quite make out some of the finer details that you can. Just like that low resolution digital image you email to grandma, however, we generally don't need to see the details we're missing to live a perfectly typical life.

So why do normally sighted people assume our vision is blurry? Those of us with albinism should keep in mind that for normally sighted people, the only reason they experience reduced vision is because the lens in front of their eye doesn't focus the image clearly onto the back of their eye. That's what near-sightedness, far-sightedness, and astigmatism are - focusing problems. Glasses and contacts correct these problems by reshaping the light entering the eye so that it does send an in focus image to the back of the eye, much like you would correct a blurry slide projector or a blurry image in your binoculars by turning the focus knob and thereby repositioning the lens. People with albinism also have these problems affecting our ability to focus. That's why it can be important for young children and even babies with albinism to wear glasses - the back of the eye and the children's use of their vision can both develop more fully in many children if they have the most focused image possible on the back of the eye.

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