NEWS LESSON

What a Small Return of Sight Could Change



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What everyday invention do you wish someone would improve?
2. What makes a science headline sound too good to be true?
3. Can a small improvement be life-changing?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**photoreceptors**	☐	A	a slow process of getting worse
2	**mutation**	☐	B	a new medical problem that makes treatment harder
3	**degeneration**	☐	C	a change in a gene
4	**complication**	☐	D	how much fine detail an image shows
5	**open-label**	☐	E	knowing something well because you have used it a lot
6	**familiarity**	☐	F	cells in the eye that react to light
7	**resolution**	☐	G	to make something become active
8	**stimulate**	☐	H	describing a trial where everyone knows who gets the treatment

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Ten patients with severe sight loss tried gene therapy and electronic goggles. Some could detect more light and find simple objects.

1 An experimental treatment helped some people with severe sight loss detect more light and carry out simple visual tasks. That is a meaningful change, but it is not a cure for blindness. Researchers reported the results in October 2026 after treating ten patients with advanced retinitis pigmentosa, an inherited eye disease. The approach combined gene therapy with electronic goggles.

2 Retinitis pigmentosa gradually damages the retina's photoreceptors, the specialised cells that normally convert light into signals the nervous system can interpret. By the later stages, these cells may no longer function, making conventional restoration extremely difficult. Yet other retinal cells, including ganglion cells that transmit information towards the brain, can remain relatively intact. The experimental approach seeks to build on that distinction rather than reconstruct the eye's original machinery.

3 Researchers delivered genetic instructions for a light-sensitive protein called ChrimsonR through a single injection into the worse-seeing eye of each participant. Special goggles then recorded the surrounding scene and converted it into patterns of light designed to stimulate the modified cells. The technique, known as optogenetics, effectively gives surviving nerve cells a role they would not ordinarily perform. It also offers a potential advantage over treatments aimed at one specific genetic mutation: in principle, several causes of severe retinal degeneration might be addressed through the same general mechanism.

4 The results require careful interpretation. Seven of the ten participants experienced increased light sensitivity, although only six met the study's threshold for a clinically meaningful improvement. Some were able to locate or touch objects more successfully while wearing the goggles, and greater familiarity with the equipment appeared to help. The visual information remained crude, however. Participants could not recognise faces, and detecting the outline or position of an object is a considerable distance from restoring everyday sight. These limitations are central to understanding both the significance of the research and the work still required.

5 Safety, rather than proof of clinical effectiveness, was the study's primary objective. Most recorded eye-related adverse events were mild or moderate; one serious complication occurred immediately after an injection and resolved rapidly with treatment. The trial was small, open-label and lacked a control group, so it cannot establish how widely or reliably the benefits might be reproduced. Independent researchers nevertheless welcomed the evidence that optogenetic stimulation can provide visual function over an extended period.

6 Medicine advances not only through spectacular recoveries but through the steady accumulation of smaller capabilities. For someone with severe visual impairment, identifying a doorway or reaching towards an object can offer a measure of independence even when familiar faces remain invisible. The next challenge is to improve resolution, assess safety in larger studies and determine whether gains achieved in the laboratory hold up outside controlled settings. The treatment cannot yet return the world to patients as they once saw it. What it may eventually offer is a new way of navigating that world.

Sources: The Guardian. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. Everyone whose light sensitivity increased also reached the level the study counted as a clinically meaningful improvement. T F NG
2. The optogenetic approach could in principle help people whose severe sight loss has different genetic causes. T F NG
3. Participants practised with the goggles at home during the study. T F NG
4. The gene therapy was injected into each participant's better-seeing eye. T F NG
5. The treatment worked on cells that were still present after the photoreceptors had stopped working. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

conventional	intact	reconstruct	spectacular	threshold	transmit	welcomed
withstand						

1. Although the storm wrecked the roof, the walls were left _____ .
2. To qualify for the programme, a candidate's score must exceed a certain _____ .
3. The surgeon's result was nothing short of _____ : the patient walked out the next day.
4. Doctors were reluctant to depart from _____ methods that had served them for decades.
5. It would be impossible to _____ the ancient temple from the few fragments that survive.
6. The council _____ the proposal, saying it would bring much-needed jobs.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. These cells may no longer function, making _____ of normal sight extremely difficult. (RESTORE)
2. The data from ten patients are far from _____ . (CONCLUDE)
3. The results require careful _____ . (INTERPRET)
4. For someone with severe visual _____ , finding a doorway matters. (IMPAIR)
5. Some online headlines made _____ claims that a cure was near. (SUBSTANTIATE)

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. At this level many phrasal verbs are figurative. Learn the whole unit and the particle that follows, such as aside, out, on or up.

back	bank	brush	hand	pan	rule	wear

1. Sceptics were quick to _____ aside the findings as too small to matter.
2. A small trial without a control group cannot _____ out the possibility that chance explains the result.
3. It is too early to say how the research will _____ out.
4. Patients should not _____ on a cure from a single small trial.
5. Larger studies are needed to _____ up these early claims.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. How should a headline explain a treatment that helps some people a little?
2. What should researchers explain before asking people to try a new treatment?
3. Which matters more in a science story: the breakthrough or what it changes in daily life?

9 Role-play: choosing a headline

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the editor

You edit a newsletter for a charity that supports people with sight loss. You want a short, exciting headline about a small trial. Ask the writer what the study really showed, then decide together.

Student B · the writer

You've read about a small trial. It helped some people find objects, but it isn't a cure. Explain why the headline must be honest, and suggest a version you both like.

Useful phrases

I'd like the headline to catch people's attention.
That's not quite accurate, though.
We shouldn't promise more than the study showed.
What if we say it's an early step?
I'm not sure that's fair to our readers.
Let's agree on a version we're both happy with.

Afterwards, tell the class: which headline did you choose, and why is it fair to readers?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 F · 2 C · 3 A · 4 B · 5 H · 6 E · 7 D · 8 G

4 True, false or not given

1 F · 2 T · 3 NG · 4 F · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 intact · 2 threshold · 3 spectacular · 4 conventional · 5 reconstruct · 6 welcomed

6 Word forms

1 restoration · 2 conclusive · 3 interpretation · 4 impairment · 5 unsubstantiated

7 Language focus

1 brush · 2 rule · 3 pan · 4 bank · 5 back

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