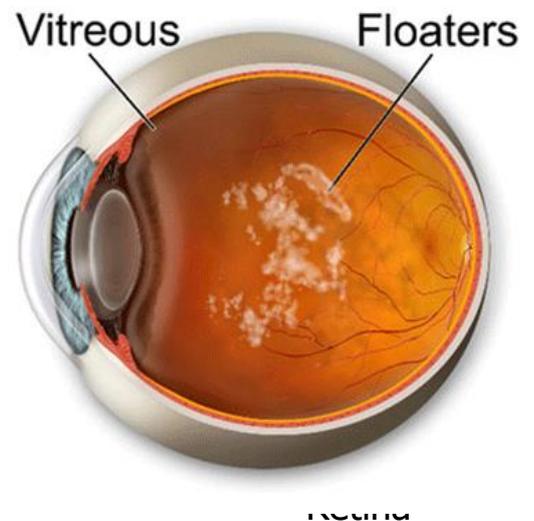


Flashes and Floaters

The vitreous is the clear gel that fills up most of the inside of the eyeball. With ageing the vitreous collapses and pulls away from the retina (the camera film at the back of the eye). This happens in almost everyone eventually and is called a vitreous detachment. Vitreous detachment can occur earlier than it otherwise would after surgery or injury. Some people will be completely unaware that they have had a vitreous detachment. Others will notice some floaters due to opacities and debris in the vitreous interfering with the line of sight and casting a shadow on the retina. They may look like spots, spider webs, blobs or lines. The vitreous can also tug on the retina creating the sensation of a flash of light.



If the vitreous tugs too hard on the retina it can lead to a retinal tear or retinal detachment. These are serious conditions that need laser treatment or surgery. If you have new symptoms of flashes and floaters then your optometrist or ophthalmologist will need to dilate your pupils and carefully check the retina at the back of the eye for tears or detachment.

If no retinal tear or detachment is found then no treatment is necessary. Your optometrist or ophthalmologist will advise if any further check-ups are needed. The flashes may continue for a while but will usually decrease in frequency.

After a few months, most people will find the floaters less bothersome. Either because they have floated out of the line of sight, or because they have got used to them. Sometimes laser can be used to break up a large floater if it is not too close to other structures in the eye. If after 3 months floaters are particularly bothersome and interfering with your life, then you can be referred to a retinal surgeon for consideration of complete removal of the vitreous. This operation is usually very effective at completely removing the floaters but carries a 1 in 50 risk of retinal detachment that would require further surgery and could result in permanent loss of vision. For some people, the risk is worth it if they cannot function properly due to the floaters.

If there is a sudden onset of new floaters or increased frequency of flashes or loss of some peripheral vision it is very important to see your optometrist or ophthalmologist again to make sure there is not a retinal tear or detachment.