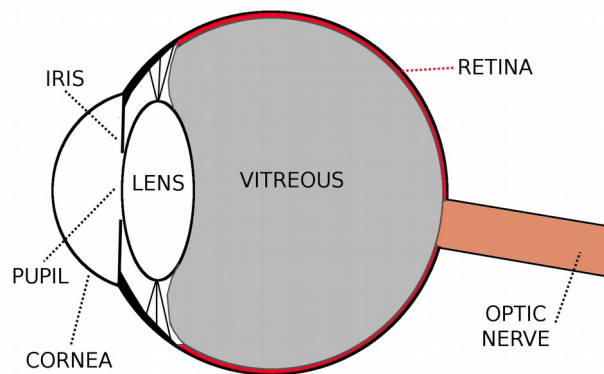


Floaters and Flashes

The first thing you should understand is that most floaters are “normal” and of no great concern. However, if you notice a **sudden increase in floaters**, or a **large new floater**, especially if accompanied by **sudden flashes of light** in your peripheral vision then you should ***seek advice promptly***.

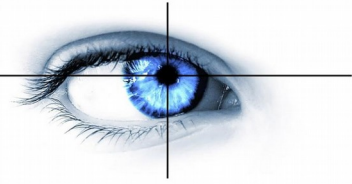
What are Floaters?

Floaters are dark specks in the form of dots, circles, lines, or cobwebs that seem to move across your field of vision. They are most noticeable when you are looking at a light-coloured background, such as the sky or a white wall. Floaters come in various sizes and numbers, and they seem to move when you look in different directions.



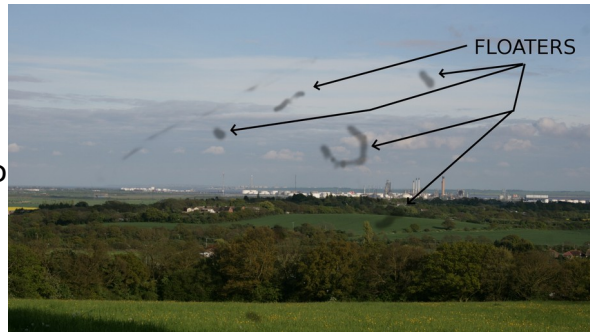
Floaters are caused by small pieces of debris that float around in the *vitreous humour* of the eye (often just called the *vitreous*).

The *vitreous* is a clear, jelly-like substance that fills the space in the middle of the eyeball between the *lens* and the light-sensitive *retina*. It is mostly made up of water, along with other substances that help maintain the shape of the *vitreous*.



Ageing Process

Floaters occur as part of the natural ageing process. They can occur at any age, but your risk of developing floaters increases as you get older. This is because the *vitreous* tends to become softer, and strands of protein (collagen) can clump together within it. These strands are visible to you because they cast a shadow on the *retina*, and they may appear to swirl as your eyes move.



If you get a sudden increase in floaters then you should seek expert advice (e.g. from your optometrist / optician) at your earliest opportunity. A sudden increase in floaters, especially if accompanied by flashes (see below), may indicate that the eye has developed a “*Posterior Vitreous Detachment*” (**see below**).

What About Flashes?

Sometimes people will start to notice sudden momentary flashes in the vision, typically out to one side, and looking a bit like someone turning a light on and off, or like someone taking flash photos.

If you start to notice something like this then you should seek prompt advice from your optometrist / optician. Such flashing is usually caused by the *vitreous* pulling on the edge of the *retina*, and usually indicates that the eye has developed a “*Posterior Vitreous Detachment*” (**see below**).

Another common type of flashing which some people get in their vision is more like shimmering jagged curved lines, which typically last for 10-20 minutes. This is a visual form of migraine and may be accompanied by (or followed by) a headache.

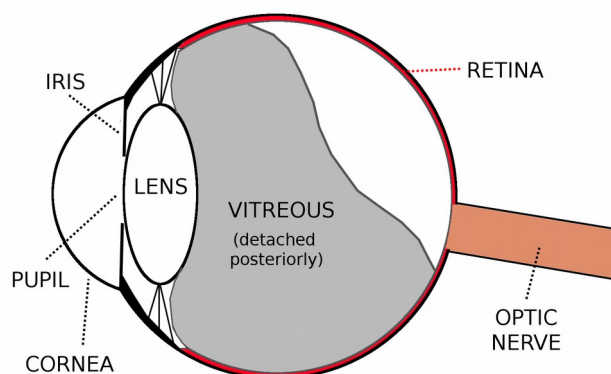


Posterior Vitreous Detachment (PVD)

- **NOT the same as a retinal detachment**

A sudden increase in floaters (with or without flashes of light) can be a symptom of *Posterior Vitreous Detachment (PVD)*. This is a common condition that occurs in around three-quarters of people over 65 years of age. *PVD* happens as part of the **ageing process** described above.

A *PVD* occurs when the *vitreous* partially collapses in on itself, coming away from the retina, and detaching posteriorly (see image above).



Around 10% of patients with *PVD* develop a *retinal tear*, and around 40% of eyes with an acute retinal tear will develop a *retinal detachment* if left untreated. It is important to remember though that, if you develop a tear or detachment, there are very successful treatments available.

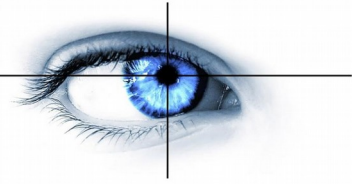
Prompt assessment and treatment (if necessary) is the key to avoiding long-term complications. It is therefore essential that, if you have symptoms of *PVD*, then you should come to see us so that we can check that you are not one of the unlucky 10%.

IMPORTANT: Even if your *PVD* is diagnosed as being uncomplicated (i.e. no evidence of *retinal tear* or *retinal detachment*) then you should still monitor your symptoms, as there is sometimes a delay in the formation of *tears* and *detachments*.

Seek further advice straight away if you are in any doubt about your symptoms, especially if flashes worsen, or you get a shadow coming across the vision (usually from the edge inwards, from any direction).

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Retinal Tear / Retinal Detachment

In a minority of cases of *PVD*, if the detached *vitreous* pulls on the *retina*, it can cause a small break or tear in the *retina*. This in turn can lead to fluid seeping behind the *retina* causing it to detach. The majority of *PVD*'s do not cause a *retinal tear* or *retinal detachment*.

If you do have a *retinal detachment*, you will need to be seen as soon as possible by a hospital eye doctor (ophthalmologist). A *retinal detachment* is where the *retina* separates from the inner back wall of the eye. This can lead to permanent damage to the sight.

The initial symptoms of *retinal detachment* can be quite similar to those of *PVD*, which is why you should have *PVD* symptoms checked out promptly. However, unlike *PVD*, *retinal detachment* is relatively rare, affecting only about 1 in 8,000 people each year.

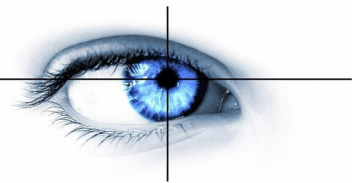
If your *retina* is detached, you will usually experience:

- a large number of floaters
- bright flashes of light
- a shadow coming across the vision – usually from the edge inwards, from any direction

If you think you may have *retinal detachment*, seek **immediate medical attention** from either your GP or optometrist / optician.

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