

Flashes and Floaters

Flashes and floaters are usually the ocular symptoms of a posterior vitreous detachment (PVD). Occasionally they can indicate a retinal tear or retinal detachment.

What is a posterior vitreous detachment?

A PVD is a common condition of the eye in which the vitreous humour separates from the retina. The vitreous is a clear gel like substance that fills the eye behind the lens. The vitreous is attached to the surface of the retina. Over time the vitreous slowly shrinks and eventually pulls away from the retina. A PVD is rarely sight threatening and usually requires no treatment. It normally affects people over the age of 50. Very rarely a PVD can result in damage to the retina in the form of a macula hole or a retinal tear or detachment.

What are floaters?

People who have healthy eyes often see floaters. They appear as spots, lines and cobwebs. They are most noticeable against a plain surface such as a white wall or a clear blue sky. When the vitreous shrinks it becomes stringy. Floaters are the strands in the vitreous. The strands cast tiny moving shadows on the retina, hence the name floaters. Treatment is not advised in most cases.

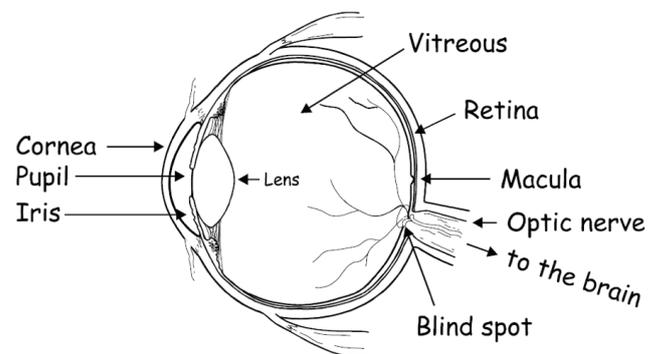
What are flashes?

As the vitreous shrinks it can tug on the retina at the back of your eye. This can cause flashes of light at the edge of your vision. These differ from a visual disturbance or 'zig zag' effect that can occur with ocular migraine.

When should you be concerned?

If you notice:

- flashes or floaters getting worse
- a black shadow in your vision
- a sudden shower of tiny floaters
- a curtain or veil over your vision
- any sudden loss of vision.



Prompt examination of the eye is necessary by an eye care professional. The eye will have to be dilated to ensure the PVD has not resulted in damage to the retina. If you require advice please contact your optometrist. If you cannot do this you should seek urgent attention from an eye casualty department.

What will happen if the retina tears?

A tear may be treated by using a laser. If treated quickly, you may have a better chance of full recovery. However, if your retina has become detached, you will need surgery. The operation may restore most of your vision but may come too late for a full recovery.

Regular eye examinations are essential for the early detection of problems.

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