

Vitreous Degeneration

This material will help you understand vitreous degeneration and how it is treated.

What is vitreous degeneration?

Vitreous is the gel-like substance that fills the inside of the eye behind the lens (see image on the right). Before you were born, it helped maintain the shape of the eye and nourish the eye as it developed. When you were younger, the vitreous gel filled the eyeball like Jell-O. The vitreous also contains fibers that attach to the surface of the retina (see image on the right). Over time, the vitreous begins to liquefy and shrink. Then the fibers can pull on the retina. Vitreous degeneration results in floaters. Floaters are seen as small moving dots or wispy gray spots or lines. The final stage of vitreous degeneration occurs when the vitreous completely separates from the retina. This is known as a posterior vitreous detachment.

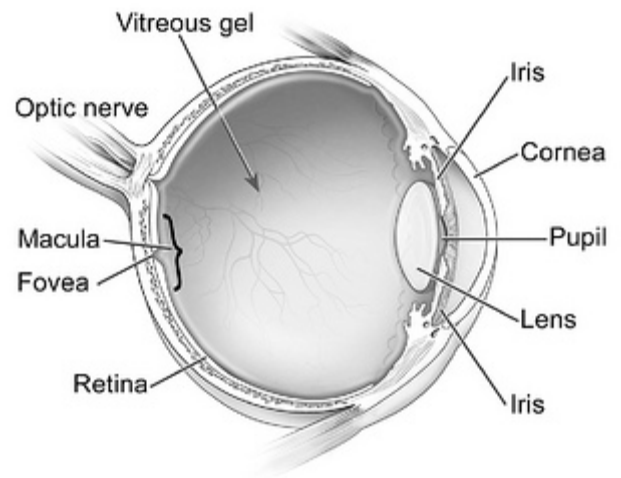


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What causes vitreous degeneration?

The most common cause of vitreous degeneration is advancing age. Those above the age of 50 are most often affected, though younger people can also have vitreous degeneration. Other conditions that may quicken the onset of this eye condition include:

- Previous cataract surgery

- Nearsightedness (myopia)
- Eye trauma

What is the treatment for vitreous degeneration?

In most cases, vitreous degeneration does not affect eyesight, but certainly may be annoying. There is no good treatment for removing the floaters. Surgery to remove the vitreous gel from the eye is reserved for more serious problems, like a detached retina. That is because the surgery can have complications.

We recommend that people try to learn to see around their floaters. The floaters usually settle to the bottom of the eye like the snow in a snow-globe and stop being as bothersome as time passes.

The brain also gets tired of looking at a floater all of the time and starts to ignore it. You will always be able to see the floater again if you concentrate on it, or if you are looking into the sky or another very light background.

The floater is not dangerous unless it is accompanied by a flurry of new floaters and/or flashing lights that look like lightning inside your eye. This can represent a retinal tear from an area where the vitreous gel is pulling too strongly. A retinal tear can lead to a retinal detachment. So, flashing lights and sudden new floaters or any decrease in vision may be a sign of a retinal tear or detachment. People often say a bad retinal detachment is like “a curtain being pulled” over their vision. If this happens to you, you need to see your eye doctor immediately. Both retinal tears and retinal detachments require immediate treatment.

You should contact your eye doctor right away if you notice these symptoms. Retinal tears and detachments that are treated immediately have the best outcomes. If you treat a retinal tear immediately, you have a great chance that

it will not go on to become a retinal detachment. Retinal tears are often treated with laser surgery, though they can also be treated through other methods. It depends on how severe the tear is. Your eye doctor will discuss which treatment method is best for you.