

Floaters and Flashes

What Are Floaters?

Floaters are shapes which drift across your vision. The exact form of these varies – they have been described as small dots or flies, cobwebs or strands of hair.

What Causes Floaters?

The middle of the eye is filled with a clear, jelly-like substance, the vitreous. As the eye ages, strands of a protein called collagen form within the vitreous. These strands swirl gently as the eye moves, casting shadows on the retina and giving the perception of floaters. This is a normal ageing change and is generally benign.

Occasionally, in people aged 40 years and above, the vitreous can separate from the retina. As the vitreous separates, it pulls on the retina, causing the eye to see flashes of bright light. A sudden increase (shower) of floaters is usually seen at the same time. In these cases, floaters and flashes of light are an indicator of a serious problem of retinal tears or posterior vitreous detachment, which have a high risk of sight loss.

Floaters can also be the effect of blood or inflammatory debris in the vitreous rather than age-related degeneration.

Who Is At Risk Of Getting Floaters And Flashes?

Changes in the vitreous are part of the natural ageing process of the eye. Benign floaters are quite common in people over the age of 40 whose eyes are otherwise normal.

The vitreous in short-sighted people tends to undergo degeneration earlier. Therefore, myopic people often experience floaters at a younger age.

People with diseases of the retina such as diabetic retinopathy, inflammation of the eye and eye injuries may see floaters unrelated to age-related vitreous degeneration. This can also happen after certain eye laser treatments or surgeries.

Are Floaters And Flashes Serious?

Generally, individuals who notice one or two floaters need not be concerned, particularly if they have been present for many months or years.

However, in about 10% of cases, floaters are a symptom of vitreous degeneration that may affect the retina with tears or retinal detachments. This can threaten sight if left untreated. Therefore, it is recommended that you undergo a full eye examination if you experience floaters and/or flashes of light for the first time. This is even more important if you suffer from short-sightedness, as the risk of retinal tears and detachments is higher.

You should also consult your ophthalmologist immediately for reassessment if there is a sudden increase in floaters, especially if accompanied with white flashes of light.

Retinal tears that are detected early may be treated with laser therapy, but if they progress to retinal detachments, surgery may be required.

If you have a known eye disease, eye injury or have undergone an eye operation previously and you develop floaters, you should see your ophthalmologist as soon as possible. This is because the floaters may not be caused by vitreous degeneration.

Can Floaters Be Removed?

Treatment of floaters by lasers or surgery is technically possible but carries significant risks to sight because of possible complications such as retinal detachment and cataract. Therefore, unless the floaters are accompanied by any sight-threatening conditions, active treatments like this are not recommended.

The information provided is not exhaustive. Further discussion with your doctor is strongly recommended.

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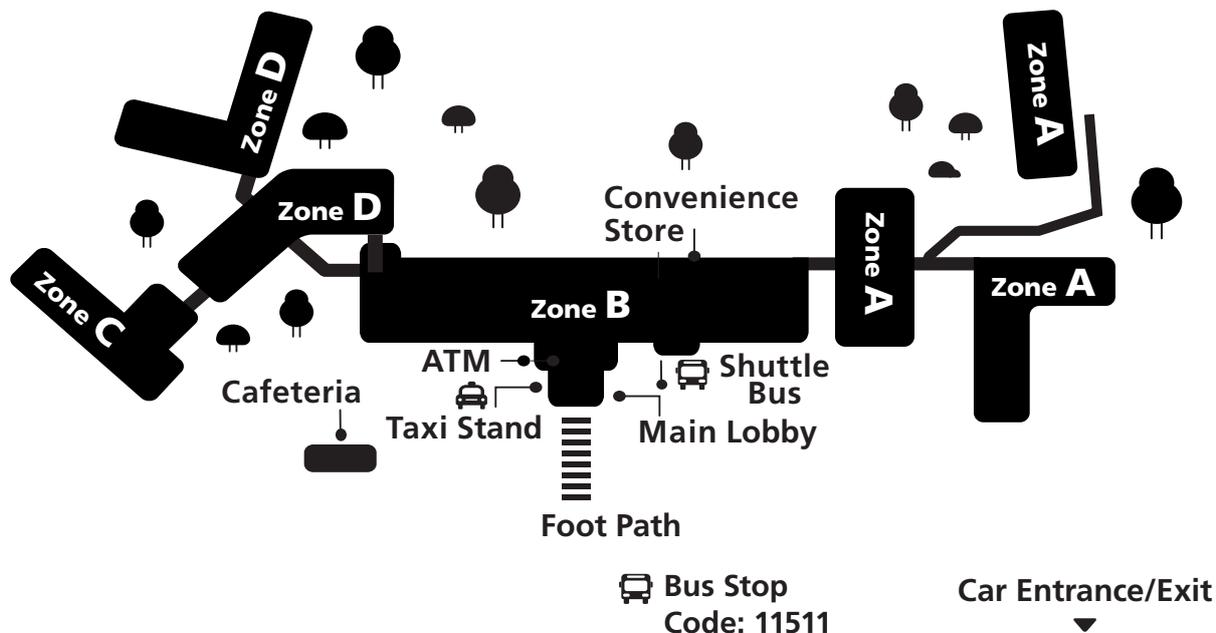
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