

RETINAL DETACHMENT

What is retinal detachment?

Usually the retina is attached to the inner surface of the eye. If there is a tear or hole in the retina then fluid can get underneath. This weakens the attachment so that the retina becomes detached - rather like wallpaper peeling off a damp wall. When this happens, the retina cannot compose a clear picture from the incoming rays and your vision becomes blurred and dim.

Who is more likely to suffer?

Detachment of the retina happens more to middle aged, short sighted people. However, it is quite uncommon and only about one person in ten thousand is affected. Very rarely, younger people can have a weakness of the retina, or it can be detached as a result of a blow to the head.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom is a shadow spreading across the vision of one eye. One may also experience bright flashes of light and/or showers of dark spots called floaters. These symptoms are never painful. Many people experience flashes or floaters and these are not necessarily a cause for alarm. However, if they are severe and seem to be getting worse, and/or vision is being lost, a doctor should be seen urgently. Prompt treatment can often minimise the damage to the eye.

What is the treatment?

With early help, it may only be necessary to have laser or freezing treatment. This is usually performed under a local anaesthetic. Often however, an operation to repair the hole in the retina will be needed. This is usually done under a general anaesthetic and can be repaired in a single operation in 90% of cases. This does not usually cause pain, but the eye will be sore and swollen afterwards. The patient will usually need to stay in hospital for two or three days after the operation.

Can retinal detachment be prevented?

If your family has a history of retinal detachment, or your doctor finds a weakness in your retina then preventive laser or freezing treatment may be needed. In most cases however it is not possible to take preventive action. Retinal detachment does not happen as a result of straining your eyes, bending or heavy lifting.