

Epiretinal Membrane

Patient information leaflet

What has been found

A very fine sheet of tissue has formed on the surface of your macula, the central part of the retina. It is often described as cellophane or a film lying on the retina. The medical name is epiretinal membrane, sometimes called macular pucker.

Most are found by chance, on a scan taken for another reason — frequently during the measurements before cataract surgery. The word membrane sounds alarming, and the scan image looks dramatic. In practice, most never need any treatment at all.

Why it forms

Usually with age, as the vitreous jelly separates from the retina and leaves a few cells behind which multiply into a thin layer. It can also follow a retinal tear, inflammation inside the eye, or previous eye surgery. Often there is no identifiable reason.

What you may notice

- Nothing at all — which is true for a great many people
- Straight lines appearing slightly bent or wavy
- Letters looking crowded or distorted when you read
- Objects appearing larger or smaller in that eye than in the other
- A mild blur that glasses do not improve

What happens now

The membrane is photographed and measured with an OCT scan, which shows its thickness and how much it is wrinkling the retina underneath. That scan is repeated at intervals so that any change is measured rather than guessed at. Most membranes remain stable for years.

When surgery is considered

- Only when the distortion or blur genuinely interferes with what you want to do — not because a membrane is visible on a scan.
- The operation is a vitrectomy, in which the membrane is peeled from the retinal surface.
- It usually improves distortion more reliably than it improves sharpness, and recovery is gradual over months.
- Cataract tends to progress afterwards, which is worth knowing in advance.

If your membrane is mild, the most likely course is that it stays that way. The purpose of monitoring is to catch the minority that change, not to work towards an operation.

Reviewed by Dr. Aysun Yucel Gencoglu, MD, FEBO, FICO. Further patient information on retinal conditions is published by the American Society of Retina Specialists at asrs.org/patients.

Notes for you from today's consultation

