

FLOATERS & FLASHES

WHAT ARE FLOATERS?

You may sometimes see small specks or clouds moving in your field of vision. These are called floaters. You can often see them when looking at a plain background, like a blank wall or blue sky. Floaters are actually tiny clumps of gel or cells inside the **vitreous**, the gel-like fluid that fills the inside of your eye.

While these objects look like they are in front of your eye, they are actually floating inside it. What you see are the shadows they cast on the retina, the layer of cells lining the back of the eye. Floaters can appear as different shapes such as dots, circles, lines, clouds, or cobwebs.

WHAT CAUSES FLOATERS?

When people reach middle age, the vitreous gel may start to thicken or shrink, forming clumps or strands inside the eye. The vitreous gel pulls away from the back wall of the eye, causing a **posterior vitreous detachment**. This is a common cause of floaters. A posterior vitreous detachment commonly occurs at a younger age in people who:

- are nearsighted;
- have undergone cataract operations;
- have had inflammation inside the eye.

The appearance of floaters may be alarming, especially if they develop very suddenly. You should see your ophthalmologist if you develop new floaters, especially if you are over 45 years of age.

ARE FLOATERS EVER SERIOUS?

Most floaters are harmless, but the retina can tear when the shrinking vitreous gel pulls away from the wall of the eye. A torn retina is always a serious problem, since it can lead to a retinal detachment. You should see your ophthalmologist if:

- new floaters appears suddenly;
- you see sudden flashes of light.

If you notice the loss of side vision, you should see your ophthalmologist right away.

CAN FLOATERS BE REMOVED?

Floaters are usually harmless and fade over time or become less bothersome, requiring no treatment. However, floaters may be a symptom of a tear in the retina, which is a serious problem. If a retinal tear is not treated, the retina may detach from the back of the eye. The only treatment for a detached retina is surgery. Surgery to remove floaters is almost never required. Vitamin therapy will not cause floaters to disappear. Even if you have had floaters for years, you should schedule an eye examination with your ophthalmologist if you suddenly notice new ones.

WHAT CAUSES FLASHING LIGHTS?

When the vitreous gel rubs or pulls on the retina, you may see what look like flashing lights or lightning streaks. The flashes of light can appear off and on for several weeks or months. As we grow older, it is more common to experience flashes. If you notice the sudden appearance of light flashes, you should see your ophthalmologist in case the retina has been torn.

MIGRAINE

Some people experience flashes of light that appear as jagged lines or “heat waves” in both eyes, often lasting 10 to 40 minutes. These types of flashes are usually caused by a spasm of blood vessels in the brain, which is called a migraine. If a headache follows the flashes, it is called a migraine headache. However, jagged lines or “heat waves” often occur without a headache. In this case, the light flashes are called an ophthalmic migraine. If you experience these symptoms for the first time, see your ophthalmologist.