

Floaters and Flashes

Floaters: Small specks or clouds moving in your field of vision are called floaters. You may see them more clearly when looking at a plain background, such as a blank wall. Floaters are actually tiny clumps of gel or cells inside the vitreous, the clear jelly-like fluid that fills the inside of your eye. Floaters can have different shapes, such as little dots, circles, lines clouds or cobwebs.

While these objects look like they are in front of your eye, they are actually floating inside. What you see are the shadows they cast on the retina, the nerve layer at the back of the eye that senses light and allows you to see.

When people reach middle age, the vitreous gel may start to thicken or shrink, forming clumps or strands inside the eye. Floaters often occur when the vitreous gel pulls away from the back wall of the eye, causing a posterior vitreous detachment. In some cases the retina can tear if 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.

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

Flashes: When the vitreous gel inside your eye rubs or pulls on the retina, you may see what look like flashing lights or lightning streaks. You may have experienced this same sensation if you have ever been hit in the eye and seen "stars".

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 visit your ophthalmologist immediately because it could mean that the retina has been torn.

Symptoms

You should see your ophthalmologist as soon as possible if:

- One new, large floater or "showers" of floaters appear suddenly
- You see sudden flashes of light
- You notice other symptoms, such as the loss of side vision

Floaters and flashes of light become more common as we grow older. While not all floaters and flashes are serious, you should always have a medical eye examination by an ophthalmologist to make sure there has been no damage to your retina.

Treatment of Floaters:

Because there's a risk of a torn retina, call your ophthalmologist if a new floater appears suddenly. Floaters can get in the way of clear vision, which may be quite annoying, especially when reading.

While some floaters may remain in your vision, many of them will fade over time and become less bothersome. Even if you have had some floaters for years, you should have an eye examination immediately if you notice new ones.

There is no specific treatment for separation of the vitreous gel from the retina. Medications can be used to help alleviate symptoms from migraine. Laser therapy or surgery may be required for retinal tears.

The treatment for floaters and flashes depends on the underlying condition. While not all floaters and flashes are serious, you should always have a medical eye examination by an ophthalmologist to make sure there has been no damage to your retina.

