

Facts about Flashes and Floaters

Greenwich Ophthalmology Associates

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WHAT ARE FLOATERS?

Floaters are little "cobwebs" or specks that float about in your field of vision. They are small, dark, shadowy shapes that can look like spots or thread-like strands. They move as your eyes move and seem to dart away when you try to look at them directly. They do not follow your eye movements precisely, and usually drift when your eyes stop moving.

Most people have floaters and learn to ignore them; they are usually not noticed until they become numerous or more prominent. Floaters can become apparent when looking at something bright, such as white paper or a blue sky.

WHAT CAUSES FLOATERS?

Floaters occur when the vitreous, a gel-like substance that fills the eye, slowly shrinks. As the vitreous shrinks, it becomes somewhat stringy, and the strands can cast tiny shadows on the retina, the tissue lining the inner surface of the eye. These strands are floaters. In most cases, floaters are part of the natural aging process and simply an annoyance. They can be distracting at first, but eventually tend to "settle" at the bottom of the eye, becoming less bothersome. They usually settle below the line of sight but do not go away completely.

Sometimes, a section of the vitreous pulls the fine fibers away from the retina all at once, rather than gradually, causing many new floaters to appear suddenly. This is called a **vitreous detachment**. This is not sight-threatening and requires no treatment.

WHO IS AT RISK FOR FLOATERS?

Floaters are more likely to develop as we age and are more common in people who are very nearsighted, have diabetes, or who have had a cataract operation.

ARE FLOATERS EVER SERIOUS?

When the shrinking vitreous gel pulls away from the wall of the eye, it can tear the retina, the tissue which lines the inside of the eye. A **retinal tear** is a serious problem, since it can lead to a retinal detachment. A **retinal detachment** occurs when any part of the retina is lifted or pulled from its normal position at the inner wall of the eye. A retinal detachment is a serious condition and should always be considered an emergency. If left untreated, it can lead to permanent visual impairment within two or three days or even blindness in the eye.

In addition, there are other serious causes of floaters, including infection, inflammation (uveitis), hemorrhaging, and injury to the eye.

HOW ARE FLOATERS TREATED?

For floaters that are simply annoying, no treatment is recommended. They often fade over time or become less bothersome.

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. 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 contact your ophthalmologist immediately – we worry that the retina has been torn.

Light flashes can also be caused by an ophthalmic migraine, a specific type of migraine. This can occur even without symptoms of a headache.

If you experience a sudden increase in floaters, flashes of light in your peripheral vision, or a loss of your peripheral vision, you should have your ophthalmologist examine your eyes as soon as possible.

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