What to Know About Floaters

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Bringing Americans to Eye Care

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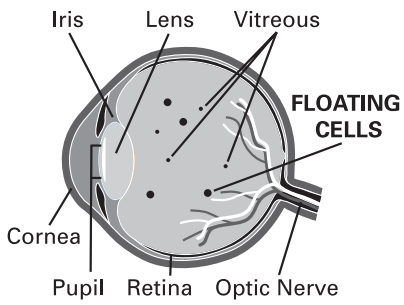
What are floaters?

Occasionally, you may see small spots in your field of vision. These are commonly known as floaters. A clear gel called the vitreous body fills the inside of the eye. If some of this gel forms clumps, floaters can result. Floaters can also be caused by small flecks of protein or other material that were trapped in the vitreous during the eye's formation.

Even though they may seem to be in front of the eye, floaters actually are seen as shadows by your retina. The retina is the light-sensitive, inner layer of the eye. Floaters appear in various forms, such as dots, threads or cobwebs. Since they are within the eye, floaters move as the eyes move; they may dart away when you try to look at them.



What causes floaters?

Over time, the vitreous gel shrinks and may detach from the retina. The pulling can cause tiny amounts of bleeding. This is a common cause of floaters in people who are very nearsighted or who have had a cataract operation. Less often, floaters may result from other eye surgery, eye disease, eye injury or crystal-like deposits that form in the vitreous.

What causes flashes of light?

Seeing flashes of light is usually not cause for alarm. However, this may indicate a medical condition that can threaten your sight. It is best to take these and any changes in your vision seriously until a doctor tells you otherwise.

- Flashes of light that are accompanied by new floaters or a partial loss of the field of vision may be a medical emergency. Have your eyes examined immediately by an eye doctor to see if you have a retinal tear or detachment.
- Light flashes can also occur when the vitreous inside the eye shrinks and pulls on the retina. Flashes of light or jagged lines usually appear on and off for several weeks after the vitreous/retinal separation.

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- Flashes of light may also be caused by migraines. If flashes of light are present in one or both eyes and last between 10 and 20 minutes, it may indicate a migraine, which is caused by a spasm of the blood vessels in the brain. This may be followed by a migraine headache. It is possible to have flashes of light or blind spots without the headache (sometimes called a classic or ophthalmic migraine).

What can be done about floaters?

Most people sometimes see spots, and these can become more noticeable with age. Surgical removal of floaters is rare and suggested in only the most severe cases.

Often, people simply learn to ignore their floaters. If a floater appears in your line of vision, move your eyes around. This causes the fluid inside the eyes to shift and allows the floater to move out of the way. Since we usually move our eyes from side to side, looking up and down may be more helpful in removing floaters from your line of sight.

Should I be concerned about floaters?

If you have a few floaters, it generally means that you do not have a serious eye problem. However, if a large number suddenly appear, or they seem to worsen over time, it is crucial to get an eye examination. If the floaters appear together with flashes of light or if you experience any vision loss, it might be a sign of a serious condition such as retinal weakness or tears, hemorrhaging due to diabetes or high blood pressure. Retinal tears and hemorrhaging threaten sight and require **immediate** medical attention!

As a rule, you should **immediately** notify your eye doctor if you experience any loss of vision. A complete eye examination will help determine the seriousness of floaters and the health of your inner eye. During a complete eye exam, called a dilated eye exam, the eye doctor widens the pupil of the eye with eye drops to allow a closer look at the inside of the eye.