

## WHAT ARE FLOATERS?



Floaters look like small specks, dots, circles, lines or cobwebs in your field of vision. While they seem to be in front of your eye, they are floating inside. Floaters are tiny clumps of gel or cells inside the vitreous that fills your

eye. What you see are the shadows these clumps cast on your retina.

You usually notice floaters when looking at something plain, like a blank wall or a blue sky.

As we age, our vitreous starts to thicken or shrink. Sometimes clumps or strands form in the vitreous. If the vitreous pulls away from the back of the eye, it is called posterior vitreous detachment. Floaters more often happen with posterior vitreous detachment, but you can also get them without one. They are not serious, and they tend to fade and become less noticeable over time. Severe floaters can be removed by surgery, but this has risks and is seldom necessary or recommended.

You are more likely to get floaters if you:

- are nearsighted (you need glasses to see far away)
- have had surgery for cataracts
- have had inflammation (swelling) inside the eye



## WHAT ARE FLASHES?

Flashes can look like flashing lights or lightning streaks in your field of vision. Some people compare them to seeing "stars" after being hit on the head. You might see flashes on and off for weeks, or even months. Flashes happen when the vitreous rubs or pulls on your retina.

As people age, it is common to see flashes occasionally. Any new floaters or flashes should be examined by your ophthalmologist.

### Flashes and Migraines

Sometimes people have light flashes that look like jagged lines or heat waves. These can appear in one or both eyes and may last up to 20 minutes. This type of flash may be caused by a migraine, and can be described as seeing "flickering or twinkling lights" in your peripheral vision. A migraine is a spasm of blood vessels in the brain.

When you get a headache after these flashes, it is called a "migraine headache." But sometimes these are seen without a headache. This is called an "ophthalmic migraine" or "migraine without headache."

## WHAT ARE THE TREATMENTS FOR FLOATERS & FLASHES?

Most floaters and flashes are not a problem. However, there are times when they can be signs of a serious condition. Here is when you should call an ophthalmologist right away:

- you notice a lot of new floaters
- you have a lot of flashes
- a shadow appears in your peripheral (side) vision
- a gray curtain covers part of your vision

These floaters and flashes could be symptoms of a torn or detached retina. This is when the retina pulls away from the back of your eye. This is a serious condition that needs to be treated.