

Flashes, Floaters and Vitreous Detachment

Floaters are small and semi-transparent or cloudy particles that float within the vitreous, the clear, jelly-like fluid that fills the inner portion of your eyes. Floaters are usually harmless and are seen by many patients at one time or another. They generally look like translucent specks of various shapes and sizes or like cobwebs. They are frequently visible when you are looking at a plain lighted background like a blank pastel wall, a blue sky or the white pages of a book. Floaters become visible when they fall within the line of sight and cast a shadow on the retina (the light sensitive portion of the back of the eye).

What causes floaters?

There are a number of possible causes for floaters. They may be small flecks of protein or other matter that were trapped during the formation of your eyes before birth and remain suspended in the clear fluid of the vitreous.

Deterioration of the vitreous fluid may also cause floaters to develop. This can be a part of the natural aging process and is often not serious, though it can be very annoying. Certain eye diseases or injuries can also cause floaters.

Sometimes flashes or streaks of light may appear. This may be happening because the jelly-like vitreous is shrinking and pulling on the retina. The retinal receptor cells are stimulated to fire by this tugging action and cause the perception of light flashes.

Vitreous shrinkage can continue and result in a part of the vitreous becoming detached or peeled away from the back of your eye. Vitreous detachments are common and only infrequently lead to serious eye problems.

On rare occasions, the pulling action of the vitreous can cause small tears or holes in the retina. If untreated, retinal tears or holes can continue to worsen and severe vision loss can result if the retina becomes detached.

What is the treatment for floaters?

There is no treatment for floaters. Although they can be annoying, surgical removal of floaters is far more risky than simply monitoring your vision. It is important to have a comprehensive eye health examination as soon as possible after experiencing flashes or if you become aware of an increase in the number or intensity of flashes or floaters. In a comprehensive examination, your family eye doctor will dilate your eyes and use a variety of special instruments to look at the vitreous, the retina and the other parts inside your eyes to determine the causes of the flashes and floaters that you see.