

FLOATERS AND FLASHES



Floaters are wispy, shadowy vision symptoms that arise from small particles that float within the vitreous, a transparent jelly-like fluid that fills the inner part of the eye. They are typically best seen against a bright background, like a white wall or a blue sky, because such lighting causes the most distinct shadows of the floaters to be cast upon the retina, the light sensitive membrane that covers the inside wall of the eye.

Floaters can appear like a singular cobweb or particle, or they may be widespread and take on many different shapes or curvatures. They are caused by breakdown of the protein substance that creates the vitreous which leads to the strand-like particles. In many cases, floaters exist for a lifetime but are more noticed with aging.

Occasionally, floaters can be due to detachment of the vitreous from the inner wall of the eye. This condition is called a posterior vitreous detachment, or PVD. Rarely, a large number of floaters can signify the sudden onset of a more serious condition of the retina such as a tear or detachment.

When a PVD or retinal tear/detachment occurs, the retina can be mechanically tugged upon causing flashes of light to appear in the peripheral or side vision. People seeing new flashes of light should seek an immediate eye appointment for examination of the inside of the eye.

Other causes of flashes of light in vision include migraine aura, which may or may not be associated with headaches. The shimmering, flickering lights of a migraine aura occur in the brain due to spasm of blood vessels that are supposed to be feeding the brain's vision cells with oxygen. These events are usually short in duration, between ten and twenty minutes, and resolve spontaneously.

Floaters and flashes are symptoms that should prompt you to contact your eye doctor, especially if the symptoms are different than those that you normally see.

Please make time to have a complete eye and vision examination annually.