

# San Anselmo Optometry

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## Spots, Floaters and Flashes

### Floaters

Small specks or clouds moving in your field of vision are called floaters. You may see them more clearly when looking at a plain background, such as a blank wall. Floaters can get in the way of clear vision, which may be quite annoying, especially when reading. Floaters are actually tiny clumps of gel or cells inside the vitreous, the clear jelly-like fluid that fills the inside of your eye. Floaters can have different shapes, such as little dots, circles, lines clouds or cobwebs.

While these objects look like they are in front of your eye, they are actually floating inside. What you see are the shadows they cast on the retina, the nerve layer at the back of the eye that senses light and allows you to see.

When people reach middle age, the vitreous gel may start to thicken or shrink, forming clumps or strands inside the eye. Floaters often occur when the vitreous gel pulls away from the back wall of the eye, causing a posterior vitreous detachment. In some cases the retina can tear if the shrinking vitreous gel pulls away from the wall of the eye. A torn retina is always a serious problem, since it can lead to a retinal detachment.



The appearance of floaters may be alarming, especially if they develop suddenly. You should see an eye doctor right away if you suddenly develop new floaters, especially if you are over 45 years of age. Seeing a shadow pass in front of your field of vision or in your peripheral vision indicates a floater.

### Treatments

Spots and floaters cannot be removed from the eye, but many fade over time. Most spots and floaters are harmless but annoying when they temporarily enter the field of vision. However, suddenly seeing several new floaters or floaters accompanied by **flashes of light** may indicate a more serious condition called a retinal detachment. When there are peripheral vision changes or unusual visual disturbances that remain fairly constant, a serious retinal detachment is more likely. It is important to be examined immediately to rule out a retinal detachment. In cases of

a retinal detachment, surgery needs to be performed immediately to avoid long term vision loss.

While some floaters may remain in your vision, many of them will fade over time and become less bothersome. Even if you have had some floaters for years, you should have an eye examination immediately if you notice new ones.

## Flashes

You may also see flashes of light or lightning streaks either by themselves or associated with new floaters. These flashes are also usually age-related. The thickened, clumping vitreous humor filling the inside of the eye begins to shrink and tug on the light sensitive retina, causing flashes. You may have experienced a similar sensation if you have ever been hit in the eye and seen "stars".

If the vitreous is tugging on the retina, it increases the risk of developing a hole in the retina that can easily lead to a retinal detachment. A retinal detachment is a medical emergency and must be taken care of promptly in order to avoid permanent vision loss.

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 visit your eye doctor immediately because it could mean that the retina has been torn.

## Symptoms

**You should see your eye doctor as soon as possible if:**

- One new, large floater or "showers" of floaters appear suddenly
- You see sudden flashes of light
- You notice other symptoms, such as the loss of side vision

While not all floaters and flashes are serious, you should **always** have an eye examination to make sure there has been no damage to your retina.