

FLOATERS AND FLASHES

Floaters

Floaters are created by tiny clumps, strands or condensations of protein material, suspended in the vitreous gel, (the clear jelly-like fluid that fills most of the back of the eye). Moving with eye movements, these floaters cast shadows on the retina (the light sensitive nerve layer at the back of the eye, similar to camera film), resulting in a sensation of floaters. These may appear as dots, circles, lines, clouds or cobwebs, and tend to move and drift with movement of the eye.

Causes

The vitreous gel by composition is 99.9% water and 0.1% microscopic protein strands which bind the water molecules and spring apart. With age, the spring-apart forces are lost, condensations result, creating floaters. The vitreous attachment to the retina may pull away from the retina causing a posterior vitreous detachment. This is more likely in those who are short sighted, have undergone a cataract operation, or laser surgery, had inflammation in the eye, or an injury to the eye. However in many cases it happens spontaneously, or after a minor disturbance.

Serious ?

The Retina can tear when the collapsing vitreous gel separates itself from the retina. Sometimes this can cause slight bleeding, which may appear as new floaters. A torn retina is always a serious problem as it may lead to retinal detachment. (see below)

New Floaters

If a floater appears, you should see your Ophthalmologist, to examine your eyes to assess for retinal tear or retinal detachment.

Floaters can get in the way of your vision or can be annoying. However they tend to fade over time and become less troubling. It is most unusual for floaters themselves to create difficulty with vision.

Flashes

When the vitreous gel rubs, shrinks or pulls from the retina you may see flashes that look like lighting streaks. These may appear on and off over weeks or months, usually more noticeable at night.

Floaters and Flashes are usually just annoying, however they can be symptoms of serious eye disease, chiefly retinal tear and detachment. You should see your Ophthalmologist if you experience new floaters, light flashes or a shadow through vision (or a curtain, or a sudden burst of these new floaters, light flashes or shadows).

Retinal Tears. A new retinal tear may require repair by laser or cryotherapy (freezing)

Retinal Detachment. Retinal detachment requires repair by operation.