

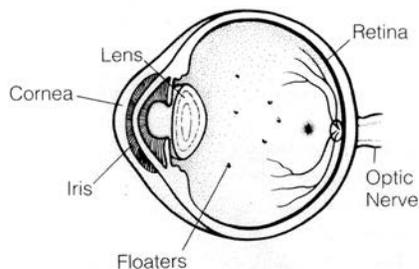


Floaters and Flashes

What are floaters?

You may sometimes see small specks or clouds moving in your field of vision. They are called floaters. You can often see them when looking at a plain background, like a blank wall or a blue cloudless sky. Floaters are actually tiny clumps of gel or cells inside the **vitreous**, the clear gel-like substance that fills the inside of your eye.

Anatomy of the eye



Although the floaters appear to be in front of the eye, they are actually floating in the vitreous fluid inside the eye. 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. Floaters can have different shapes: little dots, circles, lines, clouds or cobwebs.

What causes floaters?

When people reach middle age, the vitreous gel may start to liquefy and shrink, forming clumps or strands inside the eye. The vitreous gel pulls away from the back wall of the eye, causing a posterior vitreous detachment. It is a common cause of floaters. Posterior vitreous detachment is more common for people who:

- are nearsighted;
- have undergone cataract operations;
- have had YAG laser surgery of the eye;
- have had inflammation inside the eye.

The appearance of floaters may be alarming, especially if they develop suddenly. You should see an ophthalmologist right away if you suddenly develop new floaters, especially if you are over 45 years of age.

Are floaters ever serious?

The retina can tear if the shrinking vitreous gel pulls away from the wall of the eye. This sometimes causes a small amount of bleeding in the eye that may also appear as new floaters. A torn retina is always a serious problem, since it can lead to a retinal detachment. You should see your ophthalmologist as soon as possible if:

Even one new floater appears suddenly

You see sudden flashes of light.

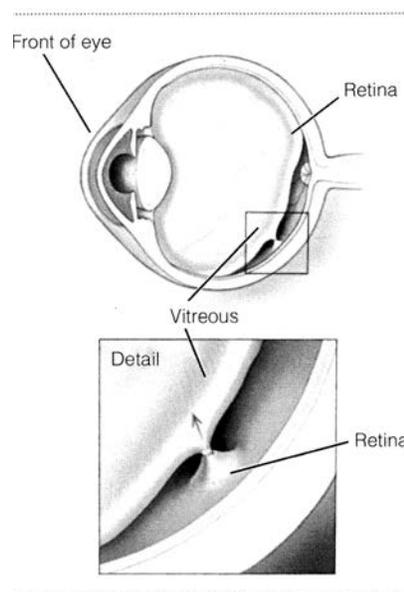
You see a darkened or blurry area in your peripheral vision that lasts for more than an hour.

What can be done about floaters?

Floaters can get in the way of clear vision, which may be quite annoying, especially if you are trying to read. You can try moving your eyes, looking up and then down to move the floaters out the way. 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.

What causes flashing lights?

When the vitreous gel rubs or pulls on the retina, you may see what look like flashing lights or lighting streaks. You may have experienced this same sensation if you have ever been hit in the eye and then saw “stars”.



THE VITREOUS PULLING ON THE RETINA

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 ophthalmologist immediately to see if the retina has been torn.