



FLASHES AND FLOATERS

What are floaters?

The small specks or “bugs” that you may occasionally see moving across your vision are called floaters. They are most visible when you are looking at a plain background such as a white wall or the bright blue sky. Floaters are actually tiny clumps of gel or debris within the vitreous, which is the clear jelly-like substance that fills the inside cavity of the eye. As these floaters move about inside your eye, they are casting shadows onto the retina.

What causes flashes and floaters?

The vitreous is normally attached to the surface of the retina, which lines the inside of your eye, like wallpaper. As we grow older and reach middle age, the vitreous gel begins to breakdown into microscopic clumps and strands. As the vitreous undergoes this degeneration, it sometimes actually separates itself away from the retina. This process is called **posterior vitreous detachment**, or PVD. PVD can also occur in nearsighted people, people who have sustained ocular trauma, or individuals who have recently undergone an ocular procedure such as cataract surgery, or YAG capsulotomy. When floaters appear suddenly, it can be quite alarming. Usually, when a PVD occurs, you may suddenly see little dots, lines, cobwebs, or clouds filling the vision of one of your eyes. Fortunately, the floaters are usually harmless, and are a result of the normal aging process. Flashes may also occur during a PVD as a result of the vitreous tugging on the retina. The retina feels no pain, but if it is stimulated, it will send a light signal to the brain. This often can be observed as a shooting arc of light, or a burst of light in the corner of your vision that is more easily observed at night or when there is little surrounding outside light. Your eye will continue to function normally with a PVD.

Are flashes and floaters ever serious?

Occasionally, the retina can be torn when a PVD occurs. This may cause a small amount of bleeding, which can appear as new floaters. A retinal tear can be serious if it develops into a retinal detachment. **Any sudden onset of new flashes or floaters should be promptly evaluated by your eye doctor.** Additionally, if you perceive new symptoms after your evaluation, such as loss of part of your peripheral vision, this requires a repeat examination.

Can anything be done about floaters?

Floaters can often interfere with normal vision and be bothersome while reading or driving. Fortunately, floaters almost always diminish over time and your brain will learn to ignore them, even if it takes several months.