



Floaters and Flashes

Floaters are shadows cast on the retina (the thin layer of the back of the eye that acts like the film of a camera), by debris in the vitreous gel. The vitreous gel is an optically clear Jello-O-like substance in the back cavity of the eye. When this gel degenerates over time, it loses its clarity causing small shadows from the areas that are no longer clear to light. These shadows are seen as floaters of various shapes and sizes.

A sudden shower of floaters can be a warning sign of a torn or abnormal retinal blood vessel. Your eye care specialist should evaluate a new shower of floaters as soon as possible. The eye care provider should also promptly evaluate the appearance of several new floaters which can be a warning sign of disease or may be related to normal changes of the eye.

Most people will notice floaters at some point in their lifetime. The floaters do remain in the eye although they become less noticeable over time as the brain begins to delete the imperfection in vision. They are most noticeable on a bright sunny day or after a dilated eye exam. It is quite common to notice floaters much more frequently after cataract surgery, as the vision is much clearer and the shadows can become darker as more light enters the eye. Floaters are usually not bothersome to the vision; but in the rare circumstances where floaters do indeed impair the vision, surgical removal of the degenerative vitreous gel can be performed thereby improving the quality of vision. This would be evaluated and performed by your retina specialist.

Flashes of light are typically seen as lightning bolts or streaks of bright white light in the peripheral vision. They are most commonly noted when the retina is being tugged on by the vitreous gel. As the vitreous separates from the retina, it may tug on the retina triggering the flashes of light. This is a warning sign that the retina may be at risk for a retinal tear or detachment. New flashes should be evaluated by the eye care specialist within a few days of onset in order to minimize risk of vision loss. Separation of the vitreous gel occurs in everyone eventually; this normal process infrequently requires medical or surgical attention.